

Help to Move On

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Transition pathways for young people with learning difficulties in residential schools and colleges

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Summary

The Help to Move On project involved researchers from the Norah Fry Research Centre (NFRC) (University of Bristol), and HFT (Home Farm Trust), working with five local authorities in South West England. It aimed to explore, promote and support the implementation of better pathways and options for young people at transition to adulthood. The particular focus of the project was young people with learning difficulties living away from home at an 'out-of-area' residential school or college.

The research was undertaken in partnership with the South West Agency for Learning Disabilities (SWALD) and Connexions West of England. It took place between March 2004 and December 2006, and was funded by the Health Foundation.

Methods

There were two main strands to the project:

- *Data collection*: 15 young people with learning difficulties were recruited from across five local authorities in South West England. All were thought to be in their final, or penultimate year at an out-of-area residential school or college. They were interviewed twice, a year apart, as were members of their family and up to five professionals they named as being helpful to them at transition.
- *Action learning sets*: professionals and parents in each of the five sites came together in an action learning set that met approximately six-weekly. The purpose of the action learning set was to engage people in a process of:
 - understanding the key issues relating to young people with learning difficulties moving on from out-of-area residential schools/colleges;
 - forming and initiating an action plan;
 - reflecting on progress in addressing the issues.

Additionally, from time to time, 'experts' on particular topics were invited to contribute to workshops to provide the underpinning knowledge that members of the action learning set felt they needed. These workshops were also open to a wider audience.

Action learning is a process in which a group of people come together on a regular basis to help each other learn from their experiences. Members of the group (called an action learning 'set') select the problems or issues that concern them and on

which they will work. They then identify and clarify the problem, and agree a set of actions to take in response to this, with the aim of improving practice.

A multi-disciplinary research advisory group and two advisors with learning difficulties guided the research.

Findings

Background

- Over the two-year period of the project, policies and procedures in relation to transition were evolving and developing, partly in response to national guidelines and recognition of the difficulties and inadequacies of current practice.
- In terms of young people being out-of-area in the first place, most parents said that they had looked at residential schools because there was no other suitable local educational provision. It was common for the decision-making process around getting a place at a residential school or college to be described as prolonged and acrimonious.

Transition planning

- Good transition planning onwards from the out-of-area residential school or college was often hampered by distance. Professionals from the 'home' area were less likely to be able to take the time to travel and attend transition planning meetings a long way away. This distance also meant that 'home' professionals did not feel that they really knew the young person concerned and what their views or hopes for the future were.
- The scope and depth of transition sessions at schools or colleges preparing young people for the next step of their lives varied considerably.
- For most young people the responsibility of finding a potential future placement fell to their families. Most families reported significant difficulties in finding out about where placements might be located and which might be suitable.

- Many parents and professionals thought that some attempt had been made to include the views of the young person when deciding on their next placement. However, some reflected that the young person's involvement in decision making had been a passive rather than an active process, that is, it was their satisfaction with one option or another that was gauged, rather than visiting and actively selecting from a range of choices.
- Due to the difficulties that being in an out-of-area residential school or college placement gave rise to, the 'ideal case' scenario was that the next placement should be agreed approximately three months before the young person was due to leave their school/college, to enable transition activities to take place.

Improving transition

- There was a mismatch between what some parents and professionals thought contributed to a good transition process.
- Parents thought the transition planning process could be improved by the better provision of information, an earlier decision about whether a placement would be funded, a 'reserve' option in case the first choice of provision turned out not to be suitable, and continuous contact with social services so that the family could be steered in the right direction.
- Professionals thought the transition planning process could be improved by schools/colleges arranging visits to a range of options for all students so they could see the possibilities of what might lie ahead; improved receipt and provision of information; more input and involvement from the young person generally; earlier transition planning; and better communication channels between everyone concerned with the young person.

Experience of transition

- Parents and professionals all considered that leaving the out-of-area residential school or college had been difficult for the young person. They spoke about noticing unsettled, more difficult, or more extreme behaviour, higher than usual levels of stress demonstrated by the young person, and the young people being afraid of the unknown and needing more reassurance than usual.

- Of the six young people able to relate their feelings about leaving their out-of-area residential school, two were 'happy' to be leaving, two had mixed feelings and two had concerns about leaving.
- A number of the young people had initial difficulties in moving into their new placement. Some were practical issues that were relatively straightforward to sort out. Others included the young person feeling isolated and lonely, missing their friends from college, and missing having young people of their own age to live with.
- For the majority of the young people, there was little or no sense of future progression once the transition from the out-of-area residential school or college had been completed. One young person hoped to enter paid employment; another expected to try a work placement or voluntary work in the future. One expected to be able to move on from their residential accommodation to more independent living arrangements in the future. Another talked about wanting to settle down and have a child with his girlfriend, although a professional supporting him thought this was unlikely. For the other young people, there was a considerable lack of expectation for their futures.
- The key factor that seemed to help some young people settle well into their new placement better than others was there being some continuity with their previous experiences that was able to provide them with some reassurance. Continuity was provided by: receiving 'short-break' (respite) provision at the future placement before moving there permanently; already knowing some of the people in the future placement; maintaining the same accommodation while moving on to new daytime opportunities, so keeping one aspect of life stable; and staying at the new placement for gradually increasing lengths of time.

Action learning sets

- The short-term benefits of the action learning sets seemed useful for the participants. The professionals attending often shared their learning with other colleagues. Parents who attended were often not networked with other parents to be able to disseminate their learning in the same way.
- Professionals valued the input of parents at the action learning sets, and the process worked best when there was more than one parent involved.
- In translating learning into sustainable action, action learning sets worked best when key decision makers and managers were present, as well as front-line workers.

1 Introduction

Background to the study

There are many changes and moves that we make in life, but the transition between what we are familiar with and what is to come can be an anxious time. For young people with learning difficulties, a major transition is the move from school or college to the next stage of their more adult lives. This transition clearly has the potential to be planned for, as we all know that moving on from school or college is inevitable in all of our lives. Previous research, however, has suggested that transition planning for moving on from school or college is failing young people with learning difficulties and their families in the UK (Heslop et al, 2002). A number of reports over recent years have highlighted many of the difficulties experienced by young people and their families at transition to adulthood (Hirst and Baldwin, 1994; SSI, 1995; Ryan, 1997; Morris, 1999a, 1999b; Beresford, 2004; Smart, 2004; Hudson, 2006; McGill et al, 2006). A few have focused on factors that seem to be important in determining a satisfactory outcome of the transition process (see, for example, DfES, 2005; Hudson, 2006). The Department for Education and Skills study in 2005, for example, identified four key things that helped: young people's capabilities and characteristics; the purposefulness of family support; the nature and effectiveness of local support systems; and the range of local opportunities available.

Research has also highlighted a number of concerns for young disabled people who live away from home in 'out-of-area'¹ residential placements at transition from school or college (Pinney, 2005). They are likely to be at greater risk of poor transition planning and outcomes because of the distance between the 'home' local authority that arranges the placement and that which 'hosts' the young person. Additional issues include the barriers to supporting good, ongoing relationships between the young person and their family, and confusion or a lack of knowledge by the agencies involved about their roles and responsibilities (Abbott et al, 2000, 2001; Grove and Giraud-Saunders, 2002). In McGill et al's study (McGill et al, 2006), parents of young people in 52-week residential placements reported worries about the lack of forward planning for their son or daughter, even when they were due to leave school soon; fears about whether there would be the continued provision of a suitable placement; or whether funding limitations might lead to an inappropriate placement.

1 'Out-of-area' placements are those where the person is placed outside their own local authority boundary.

At present a number of regional government initiatives are collaborating on developing a multi-agency outcomes framework for monitoring residential placements. There is a gap in the research, however, in terms of understanding what happens at the transition to adulthood for young people with learning difficulties from an out-of-area residential placement at school or college. The Health Foundation funded the Norah Fry Research Centre (NFRC) (University of Bristol) and HFT (Home Farm Trust) to conduct an action research project to improve our knowledge of the issues faced by young people in out-of-area schools and colleges at transition, and to work with five local authorities in South West England to try and make a difference to working practice.

Box 1: The Norah Fry Research Centre (NFRC)

The Norah Fry Research Centre (NFRC) at the University of Bristol carries out research on issues affecting the lives of disabled children, and adults with learning difficulties and their families. Through the research findings, they aim to influence policy, improve services and support, empower and inform service users, families and professionals.

The Centre is committed to the inclusion of disabled children and adults with learning difficulties in society at large. They have a particular interest in the analysis, evaluation and development of policy and practice initiatives, and the investigation of inequality and exclusion.

Box 2: HFT

HFT works with people with learning disabilities to provide a range of individual, flexible, quality and socially inclusive services, which include supported living, registered care, day services, short breaks, advocacy and supported employment. It actually pursues opportunities for service users in employment, education and leisure in the community.

HFT's Family Carer Support Service provides information and support, runs workshops for family carers and works with others to learn about and promote better practice that responds to the needs and strengths of families.

How the research was conducted²

A discussion about transition for young people at out-of-area residential schools or colleges was held at a regional forum in South West England. As a result of this, five local authorities agreed to participate in the research. Together, the sites represented a range of characteristics, including a mix of predominantly urban or rural communities, local authorities that were ‘importers’ or ‘exporters’ of young people with learning difficulties for residential education, and an authority with a significant minority ethnic population.

The research was conducted in two stages from 2004–06. In the first stage, 15 young people from the five local authorities agreed to take part in the research. All of the young people consented to the research team talking to their parents about their experiences. In addition, each of the young people and their families nominated up to five people they thought helped them most in preparing, or supporting them, through the transition.

During the first half of 2005, first-stage qualitative interviews were conducted with:

- 13 young people with learning difficulties (one young person was too unwell to be interviewed, one was considered to be too upset to participate);
- 16 parents/family members of the young people (one mother and father were interviewed separately);
- 29 supporters of the young people (two of whom were interviewed in relation to different young people).

The second stage of the research took place approximately a year after the first-stage interviews. All of the young people consented to take part in the research again, as did all of their parents and 66% of the professionals. A further 10 professionals, nominated by the young people and their families as helping them through the transition, agreed to take part in the research.

During the first half of 2006, second-stage interviews were conducted with:

- 14 young people with learning difficulties (one young person refused to be interviewed, but consented for interviews to be conducted with two professionals she named);

2 For full details of the research methodology, see Appendices 1 and 2.

- 16 parents/family members of the young people;
- 29 supporters of the young people (two of whom were interviewed in relation to different young people). Of these, 19 had been interviewed during the first stage of the research, and 10 had joined the research project at the second stage only.

Table 1 The young people participating in the project

Young person	Age at first interview	Impairment(s) in addition to learning difficulty	Distance (miles) from home to residential school/college
1	16	Physical impairment; wheelchair user	22
2	17	Physical impairment; wheelchair user; limited speech	110
3	19	–	41
4	22	Autistic spectrum disorder	29
5	20	Prader-Willi Syndrome	62
6	22	Physical impairment; wheelchair user	156
7	21	Physical impairment; limited speech; visual impairment	146
8	19	Epilepsy; limited speech	32
9	18	–	34
10	22	Asperger's Syndrome	45
11	20	Physical impairment; epilepsy; limited speech	122
12	18	Down's Syndrome; cardiac problems	136
13	17	Limited speech; epilepsy	100
14	19	Asperger's Syndrome	25
15	18	Epilepsy	117

The 'action' phase of the project was organised and facilitated by the action learning coordinator based at HFT in Bristol. The action learning programme consisted of:

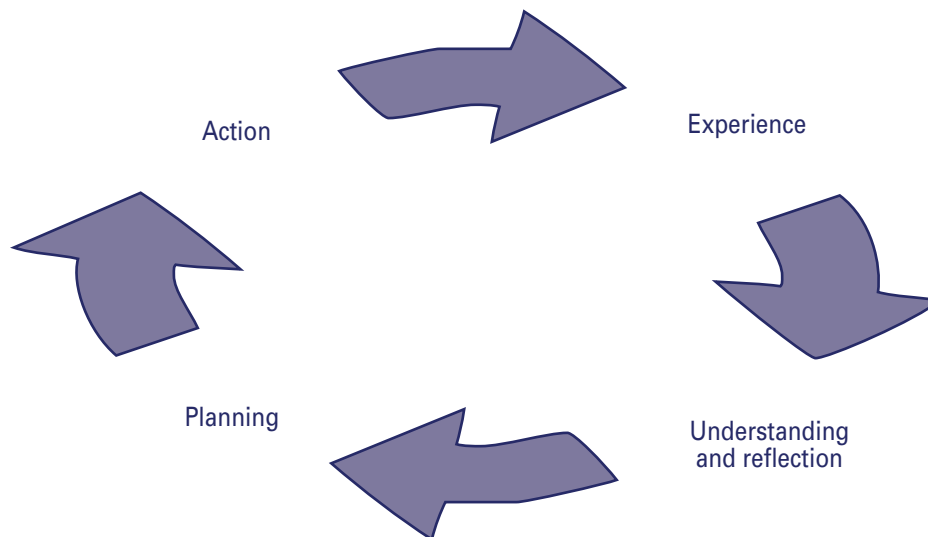
- action learning set meetings, where people came together to understand and reflect on the issues, and work on improving practice;
- workshops, where information on specific topics was presented.

The action learning programme ran from July 2005 until September 2006. Action learning sets were set up at each of the five sites involved in the project. Professionals and parents in each of the sites came together in an action learning set that met approximately six-weekly. The purpose of the action learning set (see Box 4) was to engage people in a process of:

- understanding the key issues relating to young people with learning difficulties moving on from out-of-area residential schools/colleges;

- forming and initiating an action plan;
- reflecting on progress in addressing the issues.

Figure 1 The action learning cycle



Source: www.innovativepractice.com/actionlearningcycle.htm

From time to time, ‘experts’ on particular topics were invited to contribute to the action learning sets. There were also workshops to provide the underpinning knowledge that members of the action learning sets felt they needed. The workshops were also open to a wider audience.

Members of the action learning sets were initially guided by the research interview material in their selection of the problems, or issues, on which they worked. At each meeting, they agreed the action learning topics to be focused upon, identified and clarified the problem, then agreed a set of actions to take in response, with the aim of improving practice.

The whole research study was guided by a multi-disciplinary research advisory group and two advisors with learning difficulties. The study received ethical endorsement from the Association of Directors of Social Services Research Group.

The context in which the research took place

It is important to recognise from the outset, that the ‘Help to Move On’ research project was not being conducted in a vacuum. Over the three-year period of the

project, policies and procedures were evolving and developing, partly in response to national guidelines and in recognition of the difficulties and inadequacies of current practice. In addition, public awareness about disability issues was being heightened in response to further legislative requirements of the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act and anti-stigma campaigns.

One mother, when interviewed, for example, reflected on changes between her generation and that of her mother's. She suggested that the prevailing view in her mother's generation was to hide disabled people away and not to talk about difficult issues, whereas the more questioning approach in recent times had led to more awareness about disability:

People are not frightened to pick up a 'phone and ask questions whereas 25 years ago people didn't ... people are much more up-front these days ... I think it is getting easier for people.

To some extent this more open approach was borne out by an education professional. She explained that in the past, other young people used to come into the college to befriend the disabled students as part of work experience for their Duke of Edinburgh awards. More recently, young people had been coming into college purely because they wanted to spend time with the disabled students, not necessarily because they were doing a course or working towards a qualification.

As well as being aware of broad changes in society, many interviewees reported recent or current changes specific to transition. Some of these changes were regarding the process of transition planning for young people moving on from out-of-area residential schools or colleges. Some were regarding the outcome of transition – the range of options available to young people on leaving school or college, or what actually happened once they had left.

Recent or current changes affecting the transition process

The most common change affecting the transition process was that the school or college had implemented changes to the curriculum, enabling young people to spend more time, or focus more deeply, on moving on. To some extent, this seems to have been driven by Ofsted. For example, one college was placing more emphasis on the topic of sex and relationships in their final year curriculum in response to the report of a recent Ofsted inspection. For other colleges, however, reflecting on what was working well, or needed to improve, was driven by internal forces. Changes

reported included: final year students being grouped with others of a similar ability for transition sessions; creating a stronger structure to transition by covering it in all three years of the college course; structuring the curriculum more so that important aspects of transition were not left out; introducing new topics to the transition sessions such as leisure and work–life balance; and the production of ‘moving on’ folders with the young people.

Such changes to the curriculum were geared to help better prepare young people for moving on from school or college. By spending protected time considering a wide range of topics relating to their future move from school or college, thinking about possible future options and what the young person would like to move on to, the intention was that the young people would be comfortable with the thought of moving on and that their feelings and wishes would be taken into consideration. There was also a recognition, however, that attending transition sessions as part of the curriculum could raise even further the anxiety levels of some young people. One teacher commented:

It's something which we, as staff members, have to be very aware of – that the students don't get stressed because of the transition sessions. It's quite a stressful situation anyway ... one or two of the students may have been asked if they would like to leave those sessions and do something else because it has been worrying them so much.

The other most frequently reported change affecting the transition process was action being taken to improve communication between professionals. This varied from quite simple to considerably more complex interventions. Changes reported included: creating a document on a shared computer drive where staff could record any transition-related information about a student; holding six-monthly (rather than annual) transition planning meetings to keep the planning process on track and all the professionals concerned up to date; devising a transition protocol so that professionals were working in the same way and parents and young people knew what to expect; recruiting to new posts with the specific remit of promoting better inter-agency working; and as in the case of one local authority, setting up a multi-agency transition service.

The social policy context in England

Many of the changes to the transition process for young people leaving school or college have been informed by a raft of policy directives and guidance since 2001, which have aimed to improve transition planning for disabled young people, including

those with learning difficulties. The primary statements of policy in this area relating to disabled children are the *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* and *Special Educational Needs Toolkit* (DfES, 2001a, 2001b). These emphasise that transition planning should be participative, holistic, supportive, evolving, inclusive and collaborative. Section 10 (DfES, 2001a) gives the regulations that a transition plan must be prepared for all young people with a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) following the Year 9 annual review, and then updated at least annually. The transition plan should draw together information from a range of individuals within and beyond school to plan coherently with the young person for their transition to adult life. The plan must be designed for and with each young person. The formal duty for ensuring the transition plan is drawn up rests with the headteacher where the young person is at school. Social work assessments should be carried out in parallel to SEN procedures, and social workers should identify and attend Year 9 reviews of young people who are eligible for assessment under the 1986 Disabled Person's (Services, Consultation and Representation) Act.

However, local education authority (LEA) responsibility ceases for young people with SEN who are over the age of 16 and no longer registered at school. The Connexions service is then responsible for developing an action plan that builds on the transition plan and any other available information. Section 140 of the *Learning and Skills Act – Revised guidance* (Connexions Service National Unit/DfES, 2004) provides guidance for, and examples of, good practice in conducting assessments within the Connexions service (known as S140 assessments). It sets S140 assessments in the context of transition planning, and stipulates that such assessments must be carried out for young people with SEN in their last year of compulsory schooling.

LEA responsibility continues for young people with learning difficulties up to the age of 19 while they are still in school or college. The primary statement of policy relating to young people from the age of 19 onwards and attending college is the *Connexions strategy* (DfEE, 2000). This established the Connexions service in 2001, which provides information, advice, guidance and other support for young people aged 13–19, and young disabled people aged 13–25. It also stipulated that Connexions personal advisors should be a key part of the transition planning process. In addition, the document *Information to support Connexions partnerships in their work with young people with LD and disabilities* (Connexions Service National Unit, 2002) suggests a timetable for action in the transition planning process.

The main policy guidance focused on improving the experiences for disabled young people at transition was *Valuing People*, the Learning Disability White Paper (DH, 2001). *Valuing People* set out a new vision for services for people with learning disabilities, under the key principles of rights, independence, choice and inclusion.

It emphasised the need for effective links to be in place between children's and adults' services in both health and social care, and identified young disabled people at transition as being a priority for person-centred planning. By 2003 local agencies were expected to have introduced person-centred planning for all young people moving from children's to adult's services. In addition, by 2005, all young people at transition were to have been offered a health action plan. *Valuing People* set in motion the establishment of local learning disability partnership boards in all local authority areas. Each partnership board was supposed to identify a 'transition champion' who would take lead responsibility for transition issues.

Another strand of policy initiatives focused on improving the transition process for young people and their families. The *Quality Protects* initiative 1999–2003 (DH, 1998) required local authorities to review their existing transition planning arrangements and develop joint inter-agency protocols to improve coordination. The *National Service Framework for children, young people and maternity services* (DH, 2004) set out a 10-year programme intended to stimulate long-term and sustained improvement in children's health. Section 7 of Standard 8 focuses on transition to adulthood for disabled children and young people. This sets out to ensure a person-centred approach to transition planning, grounded in the hopes, dreams and potential of the young disabled person. It also proposed that health services develop appropriate adolescent/young people's services with a view to enabling a smooth transition to comprehensive, multi-disciplinary care. (This document was followed up with a good practice guide designed to improve transitions for young people with long-term conditions; see DH, 2006.) The *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services in Wales* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2005) proposed that there should be one multi-agency plan for each young person that specifies arrangements for continuing support, and that all young people should have a transition key worker. One of the recommendations to the government from the *Parliamentary hearings on services for disabled children* (Council for Disabled Children, 2006) was that local agencies should put in place multi-agency protocols and agreements that set out how they would work together to support young people and their families through the transition process.

A further strand of policy initiatives has focused on improving the outcomes for young disabled people as they move into adulthood. *Removing barriers to achievement: The government's strategy for SEN* (DfES, 2004a) set out the government's priorities with respect to supporting children and young people with SEN to realise their potential. The strategy had a focus on improving outcomes, including the outcomes for young people making the transition between school, Further Education (FE), work-based learning, employment and adult life. The SEN action programme set out to support schools, local authorities and other agencies to improve the quality of transition

planning and develop ways of monitoring its effectiveness. It worked with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to expand education and training opportunities, and to develop new opportunities for transitions to work. The *National Service Framework for children, young people and maternity services* (DH, 2004) proposed the establishment of multi-agency transition groups, and that agencies develop local strategies to widen the education, training and employment opportunities for disabled young people. One of the central themes of *Improving the life chances of disabled people* (Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, 2005) was about eliminating service gaps and facilitating the transition between childhood and adulthood. Suggested solutions included: improved integrated working at all levels; providing appropriate work experience; training; apprenticeships; FE and Higher Education (HE), and developing valid and valued activities for those where paid work was not an option. The *National Strategy for Learning and Skills Council-funded provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities* (LSC, 2006a) committed itself to eradicate inadequate provision and develop sophisticated, robust, appropriate and transparent performance measures for learners. It also stated that the LSC would no longer fund providers to deliver work preparation programmes for learners with learning difficulties that did not focus on learning in the workplace and the supported employment model. One of the recommendations to the government from the *Parliamentary hearings on services for disabled children* (Council for Disabled Children, 2006) was that disabled young people should have full access to individualised learning and vocational pathways into chosen employment and other meaningful occupation opportunities. Finally, The *Further Education reform White Paper* (DfES, 2006) set out a series of reforms to raise the skills and qualification levels for young people and adults. It defined the central purpose of FE as being to equip young people and adults with the skills, competencies and qualifications that employers want, and that would prepare them for productive, rewarding, high-value employment in a modern economy.

A final stream of guidance and policy relates to young disabled people in residential schools or colleges. The Government Office Action Note GO4 *Cross-partnership cooperation* (Connexions Service National Unit, 2001) provides guidance to Connexions partnerships on the arrangements necessary to ensure the support of young people living in residential establishments away from their home area. It recognises the importance of the Connexions partnerships in the young person's home and host area working closely together and sets out the responsibilities of home and host personal advisors. The arrangements are flexible but put most responsibility with the 'host' personal advisor to carry out assessments and attend reviews. However the 'home' personal advisor is expected to attend the final review if the young person is expected to return to their home area. The LSC *Funding guidance: Placement for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities at specialist colleges 2006/7* (LSC, 2006b) outlines the procedures and criteria by

which the LSC carries out its duties in funding placements for people with learning difficulties at specialist colleges. This stipulates the expectation that transition planning will form an integral part of every learner's individual learning programme. The review report prepared by the specialist college at the end of the learner's penultimate year of funding must give detailed indications of how the transition planning will be continued through the final year of the placement.

Summary

- The 'Help to Move On' project involved researchers from the NFRC (University of Bristol), and HFT working with five local authorities in South West England, between 2004 and 2006.
- The research project aimed to explore, promote and support the implementation of better pathways and options for young people at transition to adulthood. The particular focus of the project was young people with learning difficulties living away from home at an 'out-of-area' residential school or college.
- There were two main strands to the research:
 - *Data collection*: 15 young people with learning difficulties were recruited from across five local authorities in South West England. All were in their final, or penultimate year at an out-of-area residential school or college. They were interviewed twice, a year apart, as were members of their family and up to five professionals they named as being helpful to them at transition.
 - *Action learning programme*: professionals and parents at the five sites came together in action learning sets. The purpose of these was to engage people in a process of: understanding the key issues relating to young people with learning difficulties moving on from out-of-area residential schools or colleges; reflecting on progress in addressing the issues and forming and initiating an action plan. From time to time, 'experts' on particular topics were invited to contribute to action learning sets and information workshops to provide the underpinning knowledge that members of the action learning sets felt they needed.
- The research was guided by a multi-disciplinary research advisory group, and two advisors with learning disabilities.
- Over the two-year period of the project, policies and procedures in relation to transition were evolving and developing, partly in response to national guidelines and recognition of the difficulties and inadequacies of current practice.

2 The process of transition from an out-of-area residential school or college

Why are young people with learning difficulties in out-of-area residential schools or colleges in the first place?

The initial decision to apply for a place at an out-of-area residential school or college can have huge implications. It may dramatically affect the young person who is going away from home, perhaps for the first time and sometimes at quite a young age. It can also affect relationships within the family and, often adversely, the family's relationships with some key professionals who might have been opposed to a residential placement (Abbott et al, 2000, 2001). It can also affect future plans for the transition onwards from the school or college towards adulthood.

Most parents interviewed for the Help to Move On research project offered reflections on how their son or daughter came to be in a residential school or college placement. Of these, one mentioned difficulties in the family home, and two had made a 'positive' choice to select a particular residential institution that they felt was 'perfect' for the young person's needs. All of the other parents said that they had looked at residential schools or colleges because there was no other suitable local educational provision. Most of these parents had tried, or at least looked at, local options, but were, on the whole, very unhappy with their experiences. One parent felt that her son's healthcare needs were so great that only a specialist college with on-site health input would meet his needs and keep him safe. She felt that while this was the best thing for him it was a very difficult choice to make:

The decision was very difficult. There was no other way really – we realised it was the best thing for him.

It was common for the decision-making process around getting a placement to be acrimonious and prolonged. Five families had instigated legal proceedings against their LEA to secure a residential placement.

Of the professionals interviewed for the project, some had a clearer understanding than others about the circumstances in which a residential placement had been made. This tended to depend on how long they had been involved with the young person or their family. On the whole, the responses of the professionals were broadly similar to those of the parents in terms of why or how a placement had been made.

This is probably to be expected as the professionals involved were selected by families as being those who were most helpful to them. Given the difficulties that many parents had experienced in securing a placement, it is likely that different professionals – probably not interviewed in this study – would have different opinions about why a placement was sought or made.

The transition planning process

Once at their out-of-area residential school or college, all of the young people had transition planning meetings to plan for the move onwards from the school or college. These were usually added on to the end, or incorporated within, annual reviews. While most meetings were held once a year, there were variations within this. One college held additional transition-focused meetings for some students, mid-way between annual reviews, to check that they were heading in the right direction and that actions identified were taking place. At another college, the frequency of annual reviews had slipped, with adverse consequences for one young person's transition onwards. As a parent explained:

We were waiting until we had this meeting which was going to give us, we thought, guidance on where to start looking ... then they told us, no it wouldn't be at the end of this year [the young person's 2nd year] it would be in the September.... It didn't happen in September.... We were told his review was going to be May/June this year ... bearing in mind he was due to leave on the 27th of July ... we really did kick up a bit of a fuss ... we needed to know where we were looking and what we were trying to think up for him.

It was not necessarily the case that more frequent meetings would lead to more successful transitions. It was important too, that the 'right' people were attending transition planning meetings. For many parents and professionals, the attendance, or lack of attendance at meetings by key individuals was an issue. One education professional reflected:

I think it would be fair to say that usually the parents turn up. We don't often have any input from anybody else ... that's the one opportunity that we're offering for everybody to be round the table and ... so that's a shame.

Certainly the distance that parents and professionals had to travel to the out-of-area placement played a part, as travelling and attendance at the meeting would take a

day, if not more, of their time. One self-employed parent had to lose a day's pay to be able to attend each time there was a meeting. Professionals from the home areas spoke about the difficulties of juggling their caseloads, and feeling they had to justify why they were taking a full day to attend one review. One social worker said:

I would be more likely to go to Claire's³ review than Jonathan's review and that is an admission that I don't like to give, but [placement x], that is a full day, [placement y] is half a day. You know I can fit that in, but a full day is just hard to do. And you are questioned, not too much but ... I do feel at times that I have to justify why I'm going ... that [it] is an efficient use of time.

While the practical arrangements for attending transition planning meetings were difficult for many parents and professionals to deal with, one local authority in England (but not one of the local authorities in this project) made it virtually impossible for professionals to attend out-of-area reviews. As a professional based at one of the out-of-area colleges explained:

Some counties now have put a block on staff travelling out of county to attend reviews... they get the minutes but the minutes aren't detailed ... all we can do then is try and ensure that parents contact them. We will send them things, we give the 'phone number, and I have to say some of them will ring and we give them as much information as you can give, but my own feeling is it's not as good. Well it can't be as good as coming.

In contrast, one professional spoke highly about the commitment of staff at a residential placement that a young person was planning on moving to. They travelled up to the out-of-area college on a regular basis to attend planning meetings:

It's very good that [staff] have been able to go up to the planning meetings and be bothered to do it, because it's a long way and it's difficult.

Not only was the distance to travel to attend planning meetings an issue, but so was the difficulty in knowing what was happening in the young person's life if the 'home' professional only saw them once a year at reviews. The lack of accessibility of the young person meant that professionals did not feel that they really knew the young people and what their own views of their needs and issues were. If the young person

3 Names and places have been changed to protect confidentiality.

was 'on the doorstep', however, and 'within their radar', the professionals would be more likely to have a much clearer idea and feel better able to support the young person in planning their transition.

School/college-based planning with the young people

All of the young people were engaged in some sort of transition planning sessions at school or college to help prepare them for moving on. The scope and depth of these sessions varied considerably, both according to the school/college and taking into account the individual needs and abilities of the young people. At one college, transition planning started in the first year:

We did surveys to find out about different members of staff, how many jobs they'd had and why they'd chosen the jobs they did, very much with the idea of getting them to look at the fact that ... very few people here had been in the same job, or even in the same area of work all of their lives.

Second and third year students then built on this work by looking at the options that might be available to them, such as FE, training and work, or leisure activities. By contrast in another college, sessions about moving on were not specifically timetabled, but students were able to talk to their personal tutors about it on a one-to-one basis.

For a couple of the young people, discussing transition in classroom sessions seemed to provoke rather than allay anxiety:

She's actually been very unsettled since Christmas because they've been having meetings at college with all the students that are actually leaving this year ... talking about moving on after college ... it's made her very, very insecure.

For others it was a chance for them to discuss their hopes and fears, and to start to think about their futures.

Finding the next placement

Finding appropriate placements and options for young people at transition can be an enormous undertaking. For two of the families their social worker was taking the lead

in finding a residential placement for the young person when they left their out-of-area school or college. As one of these parents explained:

We've not looked anywhere at all yet because the last meeting I had with the social worker was in October; I speak to her weekly and she is keeping me up together with the different things, and she's approached some providers, and when they hear of Tammy's needs, they're not so keen on picking it up, because it's going to cost quite a lot of money. So at the moment she's still looking; she said she had a place that she thought might be suitable for Tammy, but I think what she does is she actually sees a house and they buy the package around it apparently.

For a third family, a Connexions personal advisor 'pushed the right buttons' to get their daughter a place at their local FE college, after she had twice been turned down for a place on the course she wanted to do.

For the remaining parents, the responsibility of finding a potential placement for their youngster fell to them. Most reported significant difficulties in finding out about where placements might be located and which might be suitable:

I just wish I had more help about where these places are.

Nobody really tells you anything. You have to find out for yourself ... it's quite a daunting thing and it's knowing where to start, who to go to and who to ask.

Finding the right placement was particularly crucial for five parents because they felt that the young person would be moving into a 'home for life', and that they would not want the next move to be followed by others further into the future. They gave a variety of reasons as to why they felt the placement would be a 'home for life'. These included: the complexity of the young person's needs; not liking change; the security of knowing that the young person was safe and secure; not wanting to 'rock the boat' when the young person was settled; and a sense that the parents themselves were getting older and wanted to see the young person settled. However, one social worker was clear that, in their opinion, considering a residential placement as a 'home for life', was unrealistic and unhealthy:

I've had countless conversations with parents and carers about not having a home for life and this urge to ... find them somewhere and settle them there and let that be. I can totally understand where they're coming from. However, who does move into a home at 18, 19 years old that you

said must be for life? For Claire, the person that she is now at college, she's come on in leaps and bounds with her confidence, her self-esteem, her skills, her independence. In three years time ... if that young person's needs change and the home are unable to meet those needs, or if that young person looks up in a few years time and says, 'I want to go there', or, 'I want to go here', or, 'I want to go and live with Jo Bloggs', she needs services that can adapt to that. It is just about reminding everyone that change is actually a natural part of people's lives ... you can't protect people from change ... and you need to support people to manage that change.

There was a range of approaches by the out-of-area schools and colleges with regard to their involvement in finding the next placement for their students. As already mentioned, all ran some sort of session to help prepare the young people for moving on. In addition, two of the out-of-area residential colleges would actively take young people out on visits for them to see a range of options that might be available for them. As college professionals explained:

Part of our careers programme was to visit six or seven different specialist colleges, maybe the local college, various other options.... We set up our own form. We put on from the residential part, from the education part, what was good about it, what was bad about it and so the kids could come back and say, yes I really liked that because they have a swimming pool, but I didn't like that one because I couldn't go out, so they were able to grade. And the idea was that they would be able to choose two or three that they liked and then go with their parents.

The students that were in the third year and were moving on, of course, they would all be going off to assessments at the prospective new places and the college would take them to the place, plus they would take along a few of the second year students as well, so that they could see other places and get a little bit of an idea of what's out there ... and that's how they get to see it without any pressure.

Other colleges clearly did not see this as part of their role, not necessarily because they did not think it was a good thing, but largely for practical reasons:

The logistics of taking every student who is leaving here to several different homes that might be dotted all over the place is just too big really.

It would be lovely, but because we're national it's very difficult to go and do the next step and you have to rely on social workers and family to do that. And we tend not to get involved in that particular aspect.

Most colleges, however, would facilitate visits to likely, or agreed, placements for individual young people, by giving them time off, discussing the placement with them, or providing a member of staff to accompany the young person if requested. One college professional commented:

One of our guys is going off for an assessment to college in April and he's asked if a speech therapist can go with him and we will make that happen ... I'll make sure that that happens.

Narrowing down the options

Where families were taking the lead themselves in looking for a residential placement, it was usual for parents to look at a range of options and then 'narrow down' to a few that they felt would most suit their son or daughter. The 'narrowing-down' process depended on a number of factors other than simply the place being available and having the funding agreed. For two families distance was an issue, as one mother explained:

... as near to home as she possibly can, so that I can go and bring her home weekends, and in holidays, and visits like that. We're not going to cut her off; I want to be on board as much as I can. Where she is now is about two hours away, which is about enough really. I go on a Friday, pick her up and bring her back home again, and that round trip, I think that's long enough really.

A couple of families considered the 'ambience' of the place to be important:

We did look at quite a few places actually. I suppose half a dozen all together ... people were all very nice, very professional, it's a case of getting the ambience of the place really, speaking to the residents that are there to see how happy they were.

Others parents talked about the quality of the environment, the young person having the space and freedom to get around unsupported, the activities that were on offer and degree of structure to the day, the security of the placement and the back-up resources of a big organisation being present. None of the families specifically

mentioned the cost of visiting their son or daughter if they moved on to another placement out of the families' home area. This, however, has been mentioned by other research (McGill et al, 2006) as a constraint on how often parents could visit their children in out-of-area residential schools.

Young person's involvement in deciding on the next placement

Many of the parents and professionals interviewed thought that some attempt had been made to take into consideration the views of the young person when deciding on their next placement. One college tutor explained:

The whole concept was quite difficult for him to understand.... We collected the type of things he would like to do ... the number of people he would like to live with and what he would like to do ... and we matched those, we did match what his wishes were.

Another education professional was clear, however, that there could have been more input by one of the young people about his future placement:

The actual choices about the place, I would say very, very little input for a young man who was as intelligent as Jonathan was, because he was an intelligent young man. He has a moderate learning disability but you know, he was able to make choices. So yes, there could have been more input.

In addition, a couple of interviewees reflected that for some of the young people, the young person's involvement in decision making had been a passive rather than an active process. In these cases, the young person had been offered one option only, and it was their satisfaction with this that was gauged, rather than them visiting and actively selecting from a range of choices. Overall, there was little evidence of the existence of well-documented person-centred plans for the young people being activated, despite *Valuing People* (DH, 2001) directing that local agencies would be expected to have introduced person-centred plans for all young people moving from children's to adults' services by 2003.

The issue of balancing the views of the young people with those of their parents was something that a number of parents and professionals struggled with. One parent acknowledged, "right or wrong, I think we're probably a strong influence", a view echoed by professionals from different backgrounds:

It's difficult to go against a parent who's actually really set on somewhere for their child, so I would say sometimes there is a bit of parental influence you know. Sometimes some of our students are easy to influence.... If they're a big influence in a young person's life it's very difficult for that young person to have an opinion without there being some sort of sway there.

(College tutor)

I often work through parents and that's because ... they're often the driving force behind making decisions for that young person. It depends on the young person's ability to do that as well and the confidence that they've got to do it, and it's very difficult to balance the needs of the client and the needs of the parents ... a lot of times it isn't a tension because the young people themselves are quite happy to go along with what the parents are asking them to do.

(Connexions personal advisor)

For some families, the distance between them and the young person at school or college made fully involving the young person in decisions about their future more difficult. If the young person was only home during holiday periods and the occasional weekend, finding time to discuss and visit possible options was extremely limited. It was, however, considered important because the young people, on the whole, had a very limited experience of seeing what possible future options might look like, especially if they had little support from the school or college in visiting a variety of future options. As one social worker commented:

Unless you spent a bit of time looking round he's got no concept of what that is really ... it's been harder to introduce him to different places with him being far away definitely ... just the time that that takes.

How much choice?

The widest range of choice was for two young people who had each been offered a place at three residential placements. For one, this was a requirement of the local area funding panel. These were very much the exception, however, and there was thought to be a very narrow range of options for other young people. Two parents explained:

There was nowhere else for her to go, we looked at [x homes], I think we visited about six or seven different ones round about, and this was

the only one that we felt that was right for Gemma because the average age [of the residents] was 30, everywhere else was just too old, I mean a couple we walked in and they said we would love to have Gemma but this is too old for her, you know they were all elderly.

This was the only place and we weren't even given any other choices of where Natasha could go ... they said that Natasha had to be brought back to the borough ... I don't think I had any rights over where she would be.

The timing of transition

One of the key issues that seems to make the transition from school or college problematic is that the point of transition is fixed; there is usually a small window of a couple of weeks during which the young person leaves school or college, commonly for the summer holidays, with little flexibility around this. Finding a potential placement too early may mean the young person leaving school/college early to take it up, if it could not be held open for them. Finding a potential placement too late may mean the young person leaving school or college with no confirmation of where they would go next, or what they would do, a particularly anxiety-provoking situation for all concerned. One college professional explained the dilemma from her point of view:

We've got one instance of a young man who we identified the perfect placement in December and it was a very difficult young man to accommodate ... he had challenging behaviour, he had various other issues around his disability. It wasn't one where you are going to get swamped with offers. So we found a place, we then were in the difficulty of they've got the bed now and he's here to July ... so we lose him off of our books which has implications for us. But if we didn't let him go he'd lose the placement because somebody else wanted it and we'd be back to square one and we wouldn't find him a place at this stage.

Other parents and professionals commonly reported their anxiety that if they did not take up the offer of a placement, there might not be another one.

The process for most of the young people was that once a potential placement had been identified, an application would then be made to the appropriate funding body. For full-time FE this was generally the LSC; for accommodation it was the local authority. In some cases, the application for funding seemed to go through very smoothly: the lead worker (generally the Connexions personal advisor for LSC

funding and the social worker for local authority funding) would collect all the relevant information and present it for the funding panel to make their decision. Some parents and professionals commented on the long wait to get a decision about funding; in other areas where the funding panel met once a month or more frequently, decisions were made fairly swiftly. Once given the stamp of approval, the arrangements to proceed with the placement could go ahead.

Such a process added at least four to six weeks to the transition planning process in the most straightforward cases. Where there were queries to be answered, or more information to be presented to the funding panel, this time period could be considerably extended. So in order for young people to be able to leave school or college knowing where they were going next, the placement needed to be found at least four to six weeks before the end of the school or college summer term, to allow for the funding agreement to be obtained. Even that would not provide any time for the school or college to be involved in providing specific support to the young person for their future move to the next placement, and, if necessary, about the young person's needs.

The amount of time that schools/colleges thought optimum for providing this support was difficult to gauge as most thought it would depend on individual circumstances. For some individuals, it might be a confusing time, as one mother explained about her daughter:

It's a bit confusing because she can't comprehend what's going on really ... it's made her very anxious and quite tearful at times.

In such cases, one college liked time in which they could do 'run outs' with individual students if they were becoming anxious, to remind them where and when they were going next. Another wanted time to involve young people in games and activities about where they were going next, based on pictures and information about the specific placements they were going to. A professional here considered that an ideal transition would also allow time in which:

... we can work with that future provider, and for them to be able to move away from the college and go straight to that place, or straight home for a holiday or whatever, into that place with a package, with a statement of their needs and a named person in the future place for us to work with if need be for the first couple of months.

In an 'ideal case' scenario, therefore, allowing four to six weeks for schools or colleges to work with young people in preparing them for their specific future

placements, after funding has been agreed, would mean that a placement would need to be identified approximately three months before the young person was due to leave, as a minimum, and for the most straightforward cases. For young people with more complex needs, or where the funding of a future placement was queried, the amount of time needed would be considerably longer.

Such a timescale was achieved with some young people in the project. Two families had introduced young people to their future placement by using it as 'respite' or short-break provision while they were still at college. This introduced them to the placement for gradually increasing lengths of stay so that they could familiarise themselves with the place and the staff, before moving there on a permanent basis. One parent explained:

Natasha had a period of three nights in the home.... Then she came up to February half-term she had a few more days and then she went in for two weeks at Easter ... and she's just had another half-term and she spent a week in there – and it's all gone well.

Others, unfortunately, left their school or college and returned home without any clear plans having been made for their future.

Overall view of the process

Parents and professionals were asked to rate, on a score out of 10, their view of the overall transition process that the young person and their family had experienced. Some interviewees preferred to respond qualitatively, such as 'very high' and one parent felt unable to attribute a score to the overall process, commenting:

The process of looking started off at probably nil out of 10 and then as things progressed ... eventually it became 10 out of 10.

Where parents and professionals had given ratings, the average (mean) score for parents was 5 out of 10, and that of professionals was 6 out of 10. The similarity of average score between parents and professionals masked differing viewpoints: one parent rated the transition process with a score of 4, whereas a professional concerned with the same young person gave it a score of 8; another parent rated the process with a score of 7 whereas a professional concerned gave it a score of 3. Clearly there seemed to be a mismatch between what some parents and professionals thought contributed to a good transition process, and how they viewed this 'on the ground'.

Parents and professionals were also asked what they thought could improve the transition process enough to raise it by one point on the rating scale. With regards as to what parents thought could improve the process, a third of the parents interviewed mentioned aspects of the provision of information. Parents wanted information to be offered to them, it to be relevant to their circumstances, provided earlier than in the young person's final year, and for them not to have to chase people up for information all the time. Other factors that parents thought could improve the transition process enough to raise it by one point on the rating scale were: an earlier decision about whether a placement would be funded; a 'reserve' option in case the first choice of provision turned out not to be suitable; and continuous contact with social services so that the family could be steered in the right direction over a period of time. One mother said that she wanted:

More warning really for me to talk to Louise about the fact that the Mannington experience was going to come to an end ... the three years that she was there were probably the happiest of all of our times ... it is very easy to look at that moment and say it's going to last and it doesn't last. If I'd had continuous contact with somebody like [social worker] who had said you know, 'Come on now you've got to think, you've got to think'. But I'd had no contact with social services ... probably we should have been in touch because I needed reminding that this wasn't going to be forever.

Again, professionals had a somewhat different view from parents as to what they thought could improve the transition process enough to raise it by one point on the rating scale. Some professionals thought that schools and colleges should arrange visits to a range of options for all students, so they could see the possibilities of what might lie ahead. Others thought that schools or colleges could be more proactive in both giving out information to parents and receiving in information from a range of different sources. A small number of professionals thought that the transition process could be improved by: there being more input and involvement from young people themselves; there being better communication between everyone concerned with the young person; that the process of planning the next step on from an out-of-area residential placement should be started earlier than the beginning of the final year; and that the decision about the next placement should be made well in advance of the young person leaving school or college to allow an 'overlap' period between the two; a gradually increasing frequency of visits and stays; and more focused preparation work to be done with the young person.

Summary

- In terms of young people being out of area in the first place, most parents said that they had looked at residential schools because there was no other suitable local educational provision. It was common for the decision-making process around getting a place at a residential school or college to be described as prolonged and acrimonious.
- Good transition planning onwards from the out-of-area residential school/college was often hampered by distance. Professionals from the 'home' area were less likely to be able to take the time to travel and attend transition planning meetings a long way away. This distance also meant that 'home' professionals did not feel that they really knew the young person concerned and what their views or hopes for the future were.
- The scope and depth of transition sessions at schools or colleges preparing young people for the next step of their lives varied considerably.
- For most young people the responsibility of finding a potential future placement fell to their families. Most families reported significant difficulties in finding out about where placements might be located and which might be suitable.
- Many parents and professionals thought that some attempt had been made to include the views of the young person when deciding on their next placement. However, some reflected that the young person's involvement in decision making had been a passive rather than an active process, that is, it was their satisfaction with one option or another that was gauged, rather than visiting and actively selecting from a range of choices.
- Due to the difficulties that being in an out-of-area residential school or college placement gave rise to, it was thought that, in the most straightforward cases, the next placement should be identified approximately three months before the young person was due to leave their school or college.
- There was some mismatch between what parents and professionals thought contributed to a good transition process.
- Parents thought the transition planning process could be improved by the better provision of information; an earlier decision about whether a placement would be funded; a 'reserve' option in case the first choice of provision turned out not to be suitable; and continuous contact over a period of time, with social services, so that the family could be steered in the right direction.

- Professionals thought the transition planning process could be improved by schools/colleges arranging visits to a range of options for all students so they could see the possibilities of what might lie ahead; improved receipt and provision of information; more input and involvement from the young person generally; earlier transition planning; and better communication channels between everyone concerned with the young person.

3 Transition pathways

The 15 young people recruited to the Help to Move On research project were potentially all in their final, or penultimate, year at an out-of-area residential school or college when the project started. One year later, we expected half of them to have already moved on from school or college and have spent the year settling into the next phase of their lives, and half of them to be at the point of leaving school or college.

Table 2 outlines the transition pathways of the young people at the time of the first interview and one year later when interviewed again.

As the transition pathways show, despite the transition planning process, 4 of the 15 young people left their out-of-area residential school or college not knowing where they were going to move on to. All returned to the family home until arrangements could be made or finalised, although for one young person this was likely to be for a few years. Another two young people returned home to live because of the breakdown of existing arrangements: in one case a residential placement and in the other their place at the out-of-area residential college itself. It seems, therefore, that there was a continuing reliance on the family home to be the 'back-stop' when either the planning process or actual arrangements fell apart.

Within a year of leaving their out-of-area residential school or college, eight of the young people had moved on to a residential placement (that is, either a residential college or a residential care home/setting), although one of these placements had broken down and another was on the verge of breaking down. None had moved into supported living arrangements, or any accommodation other than the family home or residential accommodation.

In terms of daytime activities, none of the young people had moved into work, or supported work, although one attended a full-time mainstream FE college on a work-related course. At the time of the second interview, seven of the young people were attending, or had a place to attend, a mainstream FE college on a full or part-time basis.

Table 2 The transition pathways of the young people

Age (summer 2006) and impairments	Out-of-area school/college	Transition planning	On leaving school/college
18 Learning difficulties; physical impairment; wheelchair user	Post-16 unit attached to residential special school	Summer 2006: at the end of his second year at post-16 unit. Will be staying on for third year 2006/07 Had been to visit two specialist FE colleges and applied to one for a place in September 2007. Interview arranged for autumn 2006	
19 Learning difficulties; physical impairment; wheelchair user; no speech; visual impairment	FE unit of residential specialist school	Summer 2006: at the end of second year and due to leave. Funding applied for (half LSC, half social services) for another year at the school. To go to panel for a decision in July. Meanwhile, social worker had been looking for residential placements since October 2005 but none suitable had been found	
20 Learning difficulties	Specialist college	Summer 2006: due to leave college July 2006 after three years there Had three offers of residential placements to start in July. Deciding which to go to Funding had provisionally been agreed in April 2006	
23 Learning difficulties; autistic spectrum	Specialist college	Summer 2006: due to leave college July 2006 after three years there Social worker allocated March 2006 had not attended any transition planning meetings. Young person wanted to go to community-based residential setting but application made too late for placement in the coming year	Left college in July 2006 to return home in the absence of any other plans. Social worker trying to arrange some daytime activities. Likely that young person will stay at home and re-apply to community organisation

Table 2 The transition pathways of the young people – *Continued*

Age (summer 2006) and impairments	Out-of-area school/college	Transition planning	On leaving school/college
21 Learning difficulties; Prader-Willi Syndrome	Specialist college	Was part-way through second year of course when parents withdrew young person from college in spring 2006 because of their concerns for her welfare	Had returned home to live (spring 2006) in the absence of any transition planning being undertaken. Summer 2006: plans were being made for her to have community support worker involvement over the summer, and to start part time at local mainstream FE college in September 2006. She would remain living at home
24 Learning difficulties; physical impairment; wheelchair user	Specialist college	Left college July 2005 after three years there. No placement arranged. Wanted to move into residential service and had been for interview and funding provisionally agreed, but no vacancies	Returned home to live for the summer, with community support workers helping in the mornings. Vacancy in residential service came up in September 2005 and moved in straight away. Summer 2006: still in residential placement. Attending local mainstream FE college part time
22 Learning difficulties; physical impairment; wheelchair user; visual impairment; limited speech	Specialist college	Left college July 2005 after three years there. Arrangements in place to move into residential service where had been receiving 'respite' during college holidays for the last three years	Moved straight into residential service in July 2005. Summer 2006: still in residential placement. Wanted to attend local mainstream college part-time, but college couldn't support his physical needs
21 Learning difficulties; epilepsy; limited speech	Post-16 unit attached to residential special school	Had been due to leave post-16 unit in summer 2004 after three years there, but funding decision not made in time. Had stayed on for a fourth year funded by social services. Visited specialist FE colleges in two areas and secured a place at one to start September 2005. Funding in place by Easter 2005	Summer 2006: had completed first year at specialist FE college and would be going back for the next year

Table 2 The transition pathways of the young people – *Continued*

Age (summer 2006) and impairments	Out-of-area school/college	Transition planning	On leaving school/college
20 Learning difficulties	Specialist college	Left college July 2005 after three years there. Had three offers of residential placements to start in July 2005. Funding had been agreed in May 2005	Moved into residential service in August 2005 Summer 2006: still in residential service and attending local mainstream FE college part-time
23 Learning difficulties; Asperger's Syndrome	Specialist college	Left college in July 2005 after three years there. Returned home for the summer holidays with no confirmation of a next placement. Parents lodged official complaint about social services	Residential place secured in September 2005. Lodged temporarily with the owner of the residential service until her room was ready (it was in an annex being built). Started full time at local mainstream FE college Withdrawn from residential service Easter 2006 by parents because of concerns for her welfare. Returned to live at home July 2006: still living at home and attending the same mainstream FE college
22 Learning difficulties; epilepsy; physical impairment; limited speech	Specialist college	Left college July 2005 after three years there Social worker had been allocated November 2004 Huge pressure as no family home to return to. Residential place secured and funding agreed 'a couple of weeks' before he left college	Summer 2006: still in residential placement and attending local mainstream FE college part-time
19 Learning difficulties; Downs Syndrome; cardiac problems	Specialist college	Due to leave college in July 2006 after three years there. No placement had been identified so returned home for the summer	Moved into residential service in September 2006. Placement breaking down in October 2006 and parents thinking of withdrawing him

Table 2 The transition pathways of the young people – *Continued*

Age (summer 2006) and impairments	Out-of-area school/college	Transition planning	On leaving school/college
18 Learning difficulties; limited speech; epilepsy	Specialist college	Originally due to leave college July 2007. This was brought forward because of problems at home during college holidays Phased introduction to residential placement and day centre during the holidays in 2005/06. Plan to move there full time from July 2006	Summer 2006: moved in to residential placement and attends day centre full time
20 Learning difficulties; Asperger's Syndrome	Specialist college	Left college in July 2005 after three years. IQ 'too high' so considered ineligible for learning disability services. Returned home to live. Offered a place (two weeks before term started) at local mainstream FE college full time doing work-related course	Summer 2006: still living at home and attending mainstream FE college. Had applied to progress onto the next level course
19 Learning difficulties; severe epilepsy	Specialist college	Due to leave college in July 2006. Had been receiving LEA funding. Applied for LSC funding for another three years at the same college. Left college for summer holidays not knowing if funding granted	Heard in August 2006 that one year of funding had been granted by the LSC so he would be returning to same college

The young people's feelings on leaving school or college

Six of the young people were able to relate their feelings about leaving their out-of-area residential school or college. Two were clearly 'happy' to be leaving. Neither had been particularly unhappy at school or college; it seemed to be more a case of wanting to move on to the next phase of their lives. Another two of the young people had rather more mixed feelings: one was glad to be leaving and to move on with her life, but said that she would miss the friends she had made at college. The second used his communication device to indicate that he was, "sad" to be leaving college, but "happy" to be starting to live in a residential home. The final two young people had more concerns about leaving. One said that he was leaving college, "sadly",

having had a “wonderful” time. The second found it “scary” and did not like leaving her friends behind.

By contrast, parents and professionals all considered that leaving their out-of-area residential school or college was difficult for the young person. They spoke about noticing unsettled, more difficult or more extreme behaviour, higher than usual levels of stress demonstrated, and the young people being afraid of the unknown and needing more reassurance than usual.

For some of the young people, the stress noticed by parents and professionals was thought to arise from the fact that they did not yet know where they were going after leaving their school or college. With nothing concrete to plan for or look forward to, leaving college was especially difficult as all of the security of their ‘home’ for the past three years was being exchanged for an extremely uncertain future. A tutor explained what she had noticed in one of her students:

There was stubborn behaviour, refusal to move, and behaviour that I hadn't ... I had been teaching him for three years and it was more extreme than I'd seen him the whole three years. He started kicking and screaming and laying on the floor and then he'd end up sobbing. He was sobbing so we had to wait to calm him down, then try to sit with him and talk to him and obviously because he uses a communication aid the best strategy really was to try and get him to use his communication aid to tell you how he felt, and it did always come back to the fact that he didn't know what was going on in his life really, he couldn't cope with everything that was happening.

For other young people, the stress noticed by parents and professionals was thought to arise from a fear of change. Most of the young people had been at their out-of-area school or college for at least three years and some for a considerably longer time than that. They had become comfortable there, had a friendship network and knew they could succeed there. Having to change that for the unknown was an upheaval few were thought to look forward to, or seem able to cope well with.

Settling in to the new placement

As might be expected, the young people had different experiences settling in to their new places. For some it was a straightforward process and was handled well. For others, there were more difficulties involved. One professional reiterated the common assumption that the young people with the best transition planning experiences would have the better outcomes:

The best way is that they can visit the placement that they are going to live in while they are with us, so that we can work on their specific skills related to where they are going, that they have plenty of visits, plenty of photographic, or video evidence of the place, so that we can work with them, they can perhaps go and spend a couple of nights at wherever they are going to go ... so that gradually they are dropping off at [former placement] and picking up on the other, so that they run concurrently. I would guess that those who it happens to are going to be the most successful.

In reality however, how well young people settled in to their new placements did not seem to be closely related to the planning that had gone on. One young person, for example, was extremely unsettled towards the end of his time at college. His next move to a residential placement was agreed very late in his last term, and he had visited only twice before moving in. However, against his family's expectations, he had settled in quickly, as his parent explained:

Charlie has never looked back. It was just as though he'd been there forever. It was absolutely incredible, it really was incredible – because I think they thought, and I mean I certainly thought, that there would be nights of crying and being very upset and disorientated and that just did not seem to happen.

By contrast, another young person for whom there had been more planning, had found settling in to be difficult at first, as her mother recalled:

We had major tears when she went, she cried and whatever, it was terrible, although I knew she would be OK... probably the end of September until December she was like a lost soul in there. We just knew she would be fine, but it was very difficult. She is much better [now].

The young person concerned agreed:

I found it hard at first and then I got on all right with it.

A third young person for whom there had been plenty of planning and a number of visits to the residential placement she was moving on to, had settled in quickly, as her social worker commented:

She was really happy and considering what a big step it was, has settled amazingly well.

The key factor that seemed to help some young people settle well into their new placement better than others was there being some continuity with their previous experiences that was able to provide them with some reassurance. Of the six young people who had moved on to a residential placement or residential college at, or shortly after, the time of the first interview, two had no continuity with their past. Of these, one settled into the new placement extremely well, and for the other the placement broke down. By contrast, four of the young people had experienced some form of continuity between their past and future placements, and all were thought to have settled, and remained, in the new placements well. For one young person, the continuity came from receiving 'short-break' (respite) provision at the placement on a regular basis during college holidays. This had enabled him to build up good relationships with the other residents and staff that stood him in good stead when he moved there permanently after college. As a professional supporting the young person explained: "you weren't starting from cold ...a lot of groundwork had been done". For two of the young people the continuity came because they knew some of the other people living in the placement they were moving to, having been at school or college previously with them. Their friends were able to take the young person in transition 'under their wing' and help them find their feet in the new placement. For the fourth, returning to their family home to live while starting a full-time mainstream college placement provided some familiarity and a degree of continuity.

The issue of continuity was also making the transition of one youngster, due to leave college at the time of the second interview, a positive experience. She had been attending her future residential placement for gradually increasing lengths of time during holiday periods throughout the previous six months. What additionally helped was that some of the staff at the residential placement also worked at the day centre she was being introduced to, which gave her a 'familiar face' to relate to.

A number of parents and professionals, when reflecting on past transitions, either specifically, or in passing, mentioned the importance of continuity between the place the young person was moving from, and that which they were moving to. As one parent commented:

I think the transition's gone better for her than previously when she'd moved from the school to the college, because then she was in a new area, new people and sleeping there all in one go.

One care worker thought that young people settled into a new environment if they came as a day visitor for a period, before taking a residential placement so that it was not such a 'big shock' to them. Others commented on successful transitions where young people had attended their new placement one day a week for a period

before moving there, had attended events and activities at the new placement before moving there to get to know people and familiarise themselves with the environment, or had moved on to their new accommodation, but retained their place at college for a period to provide continuity.

Some of these examples of successful transition would be difficult, if not impossible, to replicate for young people in out-of-area residential schools or colleges who were expected to return to their home authority at the end of their time at school or college. Many of the schools and colleges were a considerable distance from the home authority, and the distance between the two could preclude the frequency of prior visits that would provide enough consistency before the young person moved there on a permanent basis. With that in mind, one professional suggested that whatever the practical issues, it was having a person-centred approach to supporting the young person that was crucial. As she explained:

I think if you're human and actually approach it on a human level, instead of, 'I've got to do this, this bit of form needs filling', you actually work with them a lot better. It's about Claire being a person, and working with that person and not working out of a file. I think it's that touch that actually makes things smoother.

Ironing out initial difficulties

Inevitably a number of the young people had initial difficulties or 'teething problems' on moving into their new placement. Some of these were relatively straightforward practical issues to sort out: positioning a light in a dark corridor; decorating their room; laying a new carpet; ensuring that an appropriate diet was available; getting enrolled at college; making adjustments to social security benefits and the way a young person's clothing and personal belongings were funded. Other difficulties that were reported in the early stages of being in their new environment were related to not being familiar enough with the surroundings and the new people in their lives. Such difficulties included: the young person not understanding what was expected of them; having to adjust to changes in routine and freedoms; peers and staff finding it difficult to understand a young person's communication; the young person not feeling confident enough to communicate their worries and fears to people they hardly knew; and needing to find new ways of communicating effectively with their parents. Most placements acknowledged and seemed able to deal with these sorts of initial difficulties. One parent reported:

They're so good there. They just sort of jump on it straight away and put it right.

As soon as the warden was made aware she was absolutely brilliant – otherwise Lola wouldn't have made it.

There were other difficulties encountered by the young people, however, that seemed to be less easy to address. These included the young person feeling isolated from their local community, feeling lonely, and missing friends of their own age to live with; and not being able to attend a local FE college because there were not sufficient facilities there to attend to their personal hygiene.

Overall view of the transition from an out-of-area residential school/college

Parents and professionals were asked to rate, on a score out of 10, their overall view of the transition of the young person moving on from their school or college. As with gauging the process of the transition, some interviewees preferred to respond qualitatively, such as 'high' or 'very highly'.

Where parents and professionals had given ratings, the average (mean) score for parents was 7 out of 10, and that of professionals was 8 out of 10. The greatest mismatch was between the views of one parent who scored the outcome as 3 out of 10, whereas a professional concerned gave it a score of 9. Even so, this was an exception and there seemed to be less of a mismatch between what parents and professionals thought contributed to a good transition outcome, than they did regarding the process.

Parents and professionals were also asked what they thought could improve the outcome enough to raise it by one point on the rating scale. A variety of suggestions was made by parents and professionals. Parents suggested: the need for more communication with, and feedback for, parents so they had more confidence that they were doing the right thing; that the young person should have daytime activities lined up from the outset of their time at the new placement, and that they should have better social opportunities with the option of going out more; that steps should be taken to ensure the planned arrangements were upheld and that the longer-term funding of the placement should be made more certain.

There were a number of overlapping suggestions made by professionals as to how the transition outcome could be improved enough to raise it by one point on the

rating scale. Professionals suggested: that care staff should be more involved with the young person; that input should be provided from a variety of situations and the young person be kept more stimulated; that suitable facilities should be available in a young person's home town; and that all placements should be accessible for a person's physical needs.

Thoughts of the future beyond this transition

Once in their new placement most of the young people settled well. The most common scenario was for a review involving social services to be held within a few weeks of the person moving to the new placement, and then again between six months and a year after moving. At this time if all was well, social services input would be reduced to annual reviews of the placement, undertaken either by a reviewing officer or a social worker. As one social worker in an adults' team commented:

It's a big difference for young people who've been supported by children's social services where they've always had a social worker ... it's a bit of a shock to the system that the social worker involvement will come to an end. We have a waiting list, so our role within the community care team is very much about completing an assessment, looking at the options and what that young person wants, setting up the services, making sure they're all running smoothly, reviewing the services, making sure the person's happy, and then we close and go and work with the next young person.

Ongoing links with the Connexions service were more variable, but for most young people, once a plan had been made for daytime activities, the Connexions service faded into the background.

The overall assumption for the young people moving on from a residential school or college to somewhere other than another residential college during the period of the research project was that they would remain in that placement for at least the foreseeable future. As mentioned already, five parents hoped that the next placement would be a 'home for life', and that the young person would not have to make any further moves in their lifetime. For one parent, this was not so much a hope as a reality, as she saw it:

My main concern of Tammy going to a care home is that when she goes in at 19 she'll be there indefinitely. And when I said to the social worker,

'What happens if she doesn't like it?' she said, 'Well the situation is we have to make sure she likes it, because her needs are so complex and there's so many health issues as well, this is going to be it'.

In contrast, the fact that there were 'move on' options available for one young person moving into a residential service was influential in the decision for her to go there, as her social worker commented:

[It's] a place that has progression ... through an organisation that has different homes, different levels of independence and different settings so a young person could move from that initial setting to somewhere less supportive, more independent. And that was ideal for Claire.

The young person herself was clear about how she saw herself progressing:

I'll be living there [at the residential home]. That's my first step. And then my second step is moving somewhere else, and then my third one is getting a house or a flat. So if I get a house or a flat there might be a person there who can help me, like checking if I'm okay, checking if I'm doing my laundry, if I can do ironing ... and going shopping and getting my own food.

There was little or no sense of future progression into work for the majority of the young people, once the transition from the out-of-area residential school or college had been completed. The exception was a young person who had moved on to undertake a full-time course at a local mainstream FE college, specifically to give her the qualification she needed for the work she wanted to do. Her father explained:

She thinks if she can keep going and get the qualifications and get a riding exam that she would actually quite like to apply for a job at Brackenwood. So she has got some goals and she knows that whatever she does it's going to be in a stable. It will have to involve living and working with horses.

This was the only young person linked in with a disability employment advisor. Another young person was expected to try a work placement or voluntary work in the future, probably linked in to a scheme through the Community Employment Services in which a job coach would support the person in work experience. A third reference to work options arose through the difference of opinion between a young person's parent and their Connexions personal advisor: the parent felt that the young person should be "out and working now", whereas the personal advisor thought that was probably not realistic at the present time.

In terms of progression through education, there seemed to be two views. The first was that education should ultimately lead on to progression to employment, a view promoted by policy, but little in evidence in this research study. The second was that education could be pursued as an activity in its own right, that a person could engage in education for as long as they liked and that it was a 'lifelong' process. This seemed to be the prevailing view among the Help to Move On interviewees and those who had helped set up college places for the young people. On the whole, attendance on mainstream FE college courses seemed to be the 'norm' for the young people who had left their out-of-area specialist residential schools and colleges. Clearly this was 'something to do' for some of them; for others it was a chance for social engagement or for a change of scenery, as well as possibly being an interesting or pleasurable activity in its own right. As one mother commented:

As to the sort of merits of all the vocational skills course, I'm not entirely convinced that it's actually useful to her, because I think in some ways she's not really going to sort of progress any more.... But then again, she is enjoying it, so I'll leave it be for the moment.

A small number of the young people expressed personal ambitions and dreams for their future. These did not always seem to be encouraged, and at times it appeared as though they were being overlooked, or dismissed. One young person had been visited by a disabled social worker who had explained a different understanding of the concept of 'independence' to him and his mother. This was that independence was not about "struggling for an hour and a half trying to do something you're never going to achieve"; rather it was about choice and control, and "having the confidence and the know-how to get somebody else to do it for you". This same young man later spoke about his hopes for his future – of wanting to settle down with his girlfriend in their own home, supported by direct payments, and ultimately for them to have a child. However, this apparently ordinary ambition for a young person of his age was responded to with scepticism. A professional supporting him thought that this was "unlikely" and that there may have to be a "realisation in the future that he might not be able to live as independently as he liked". His father "worried to death" about it, and his mother did not want him to "set his sights too high because you're always afraid they're going to get hurt". Another mother acknowledged that her daughter would "love to have a family" but that the reality was that she would not because "she is too closeted where she is [in a residential home]. She is not leading a normal life".

For the majority of the young people, there was little or no evidence of any person-centred planning. Rather, the overwhelming feeling was that the young people were at the mercy of service provision, policies or procedures that appeared to disempower, rather than serve them. For one young person, arranging to go out with

a friend needed to be planned at least a week in advance so that transport and a carer could be available. There was little or no scope for spontaneity in going out for an evening from the residential home that she had moved on to: she said “it doesn’t work like that”. For another young person looking at attending a local FE college, it was the college who were going to say whether they could provide a ‘package’ and the young person and her family would then make a decision as to whether it would be appropriate. The young person linked in to the disability employment advisor had had her most recent appointment changed several times, but a new appointment had not been rescheduled because the only day of the week she was not at her work-related college course, and therefore available to attend, was a day the advisor could not do. For another young person, a social worker acknowledged that an independent advocate would be useful to get the young person’s views heard and taken account of by his family, but added that her team manager would not agree to it because of the cost. In relation to others, both parents and professionals commented that they worked towards meeting young people’s ‘best interests’ rather than being entirely focused on the young person’s own dreams and aspirations for their own future. As one parent said:

I think people have to respect what Rose’s decisions are, but not necessarily think that that’s all they have to take into account. I think it’s what’s best for Rose at the end of the day. I think if you can take that sort of policy you can’t go wrong.

However, as has already been outlined, a number of the young people did have hopes and aspirations for their own futures that person-centred planning might have helped make a reality. One young person wanted to work in a shop, another wanted to drive a fork-lift truck. One wanted to visit Australia where he had close relatives living; another wanted their own front-door key. One wanted to be able to cook for herself and another wanted to go out clubbing with friends. Many of these aspirations could be realised within the services the young people moved on to, given a degree of flexibility and the will to make them happen. Perhaps if young people and their families had experience of good person-centred approaches before they moved into adulthood, there would be more of a chance that their particular ambitions would shape their lives and future direction.

Summary

- Parents and professionals all considered that leaving the out-of-area residential school or college had been difficult for the young person. They spoke about noticing unsettled, more difficult, or more extreme behaviour, higher than usual

levels of stress demonstrated by the young person, and the young people being afraid of the unknown and needing more reassurance than usual.

- Of the six young people able to relate their feelings about leaving their out-of-area residential school, two were 'happy' to be leaving, two had mixed feelings and two had concerns about leaving.
- A number of the young people had initial difficulties in moving into their new placement. Some were practical issues that were relatively straightforward to sort out. Others included the young person feeling isolated and lonely, missing their friends from college, and missing having young people of their own age to live with.
- A key factor that seemed to help some young people settle well into their new placement better than others was there being some continuity with their previous experiences that was able to provide them with some reassurance. Continuity was provided by: receiving 'short-break' (respite) provision at the future placement before moving there permanently; already knowing some of the people in the future placement; maintaining the same accommodation while moving on to new daytime opportunities, keeping one aspect of their life stable; and staying at the new placement for gradually increasing lengths of time.
- For the majority of the young people, there was little or no sense of future progression once the transition from the out-of-area residential school or college had been completed. One young person hoped to enter paid employment; another expected to try a work placement or voluntary work in the future. One expected to be able to move on from their residential accommodation to more independent living arrangements in the future. Another talked about wanting to settle down and having a child with his girlfriend, although a professional supporting him thought this was unlikely. For the other young people, there was sometimes a lack of high expectation for their futures.

4 What makes a good transition from an out-of-area residential school or college?

In the first stage of data collection, on the verge of transition from school or college, families were asked what they thought helped make a smooth transition. Many of the families at this stage had experience of a range of transitions already – from home to residential school – or school to college. At this stage of the research parents identified four main themes, which were: being well connected with other parents or with key professionals; being proactive; the provision of information; and good forward planning and allowing adequate time to prepare.

Being well connected with other parents or with key professionals

Two thirds of the parents thought that what contributed to a satisfactory transition for their son or daughter was being well connected with other parents or key professionals. These were very often the people who provided information, offered suggestions, or generally pointed them in the right direction. Parents spoke about the practical and emotional support they gained, such as the exchange of information, sharing transport or knowing that other parents had experienced similar issues and that they were not alone in the process. One parent, for example, said:

I was very lucky in as much as I have a friend whose daughter was a year older than Claire, went to the same school ... and she sort of had accumulated masses of information and done loads of the legwork to find out places for her daughter and passed it all on to me, otherwise I probably wouldn't have known much about the sort of options post-school.

In relation to connections with professionals, some parents mentioned a key individual who eased the process for them. One mother, for example, spoke highly of her daughter's Connexions advisor:

If I needed to get anything I can 'phone him and just say, 'Oh John, by the way, can you give me a bit of advice on this, that or the other?'... I know that if I did need to know anything I could just give him a ring and he

would help me if he could. And if not, he'd put me onto the right people to get the information I needed.

Another parent spoke of the positive impact of her long-standing relationship with a professional in her LEA:

She's been absolutely brilliant with us since he was about 11 or 12. She's always been really supportive. I can't sing her praise highly enough.

In general, parents appreciated continuity of support over a long period of time from their connections with professionals. If there was to be a change, they said that prior warning, an overlapping period and a smooth transfer between professionals was helpful.

A number of parents commented on the importance of having a named social worker. Social workers were considered to be key professionals for support, advice and information, and gatekeepers to funding future housing and support needs. This was reiterated by an education professional, who considered a named social work connection to be crucial at transition. Another education professional, however, argued that it was the quality of the social worker that made all the difference, not the mere allocation of one.

Interestingly, given all the policy exhortations for professionals to work together in a multi-agency fashion, only one person said that inter-agency working had contributed to a smoother transition. Additionally, just one professional described taking on a key worker or coordinator role.

Being proactive

The second theme identified by parents at the first stage of the research that they thought contributed to a good transition was how proactive a part they themselves played. Parents said they needed to chivvy up professionals, or get wheels in motion to secure a future placement. They also had a role in advocating for and supporting their son or daughter's wishes. As one mother related:

She [her daughter], she pretty much just folded her arms and said, 'I'm not going there and that's that' and I pretty much said the same sort of thing. I think you just have to be that single-minded and refuse to take no for an answer.

Not only did parents feel that how proactive they were was important, so too did a number of professionals. One social worker in particular recognised the contribution of a young person's parents:

She's fortunate that she's got two parents who can advocate really well for her and who will fight right to the end to get what they think is best for their daughter.

While many parents recognised that their proactive input was crucial to prevent the whole transition process falling apart, it was not something that they always felt they should have to do, or had the energy to do. One parent acknowledged that coming from a 'privileged background' had made a big difference in getting things done:

I just think it's important that if you're coming from a privileged background you should actually acknowledge that and say that actually, that did shape things for us.

For some of the parents, the role of advocate, activist and combatant was immensely difficult and stressful and clearly took its toll. Parents spoke about feeling drained, of feeling guilty, upset or scared, of being 'in a state' and of blocking out their thoughts and feelings because they felt they couldn't cope with them. As one parent summed up: "It just does all get a bit much really".

The provision of information

Parents recognised the importance of having sufficient information for them and their son or daughter to make an informed decision about options for the future.

The most meaningful way for information to be provided for young people was for a first-hand look at what different options might be like. With the young people living away from home, parents were often reliant on the school or college to facilitate this, by visiting a variety of placements so that the young person could get a feeling for what options might be available. One FE unit was particularly proactive in this, taking students out to visit different places, and encouraging them to think about what they did or did not like about the places visited.

While many of the parents relied on the schools or colleges to make preliminary visits, all of them were crucial in supporting their son or daughter in coming to a decision and helping them to plan for the next move. One mother appreciated an information pack about the place that her son was moving to which helped prepare him:

They sent a very good pack through ... and in their pack was lots of pictures of students doing things and a picture of the actual main house. So when Charlie came to me we would spend quite a lot of time, something very simple really isn't it, just looking at these pictures and saying, 'Oh look, I wonder if that'll be your room' ... and then we'd turn over the page and, 'Oh look, this person's painting and you'll be able to paint'.

Good forward planning and allowing adequate time to prepare

The fourth theme that emerged from the interviews with the parents was the importance of good forward planning and allowing adequate time to prepare for whatever moves were to come. Good forward planning involved:

- ensuring that the young person would be able to maximise their potential.
- that staff in the next placement had either met or knew quite a lot about the young person that was coming to be with them;
- that time and thought had been given to how best include the young person in decision and choice making;
- that arrangements had been made to meet the holistic needs of the young person, including their social, leisure and communication needs;
- that necessary aids or equipment were in place and the staff knew how to operate them.

On the whole, good forward planning was viewed by parents as being the shared responsibility of a number of people: themselves, the residential school or college, the next placement and the person coordinating the transition arrangements.

A number of examples were given of where good forward planning was helping the transition process of young people. One mother, for example, explained:

Natasha learns the PECS [Picture Exchange Communication System] communication where you've got a picture and a word.... The next placement have the picture symbols on their fridge and on their walls so that Natasha knows what's going to happen next, which is essential for her.

This kind of preparation for the next placement made a huge difference, especially where it was personally tailored to the individual young person. For a couple of young people, this involved several visits from prospective college staff to see them in their school setting and to get to know them, and also bringing them to spend days at their potential new placement. One parent reflected on how this was particularly important for her son who had a communication impairment:

For the last few months they had been taking him over there [to college] to visit and coming over to see him in his own familiar surroundings to get on with him. Because his communication is his biggest problem they felt that they needed to get together beforehand so that [college] had some idea of what to expect.

For one young man, forward planning involved having short breaks at a potential future placement while he was still at college. In this way he could get to know the place and the other people living there, and move in on a full-time basis when he finished college. For other young people, a residential college set up work experience placements with national companies so that when the students left college and moved back to their home area they would find it easier to transfer within that company, as they would already know what was expected of them in that environment.

Inevitably, good forward planning would involve allowing adequate time to prepare for whatever moves were to come. The amount of time that parents thought optimal for searching for a suitable place and preparing their son or daughter for the move varied from one to five years. One father commented:

I think if you're looking for a long-term placement in the area and you want some choice I think you've got to start looking five years before you want it.

What was clear from the parents' discussions was that when finding a place for the young person to move on to was left until their final year, the time available for parents to feel fully involved was too limited. Parents often only saw their child during school or college holidays or weekends, and they did not have sufficient time together to then visit and discuss possible future options.

Reflections on the 'good' components of transition

One year after the first research interviews, parents were asked to reflect on what the 'good' components of their experience had been (in an overall picture that was very mixed). Their responses were very similar to, and overlapped with, the themes outlined above, drawn from the first research interviews. Once through the immediate transition from the out-of-area school or college on to the next stage of life, parents reflected that the 'good' components had additionally been good communication and the involvement of young people in their own transition.

Good communication

For a number of parents, good communication had been the key. Good communication involved the young person and their family being kept informed about potential options and up to date with how plans were progressing. It meant that parents were not spending time chasing people for information, but that information was offered without prompting. As one mother commented about her social worker:

She was brilliant ... anything new that came into her office she sort of let me know about it straight away.

Good communication was also thought to be essential between the new placement and the parents, and between the new placement and the out-of-area school or college that the young person was moving on from. One parent recalled how three carers from the young person's new residential placement had come to visit her at home to discuss his immediate and future needs. Another parent thought that central to his son's successful transition was that:

There was good communication from both sides, from [school] saying okay, we're now not responsible any more and [college] saying we are responsible.

The involvement of young people in their own transition

The final component of a 'good' transition, as considered by parents, was that the young person was meaningfully involved in planning and participating in the arrangements for their move on from their residential school or college. A number of parents highlighted that the involvement of young people themselves, as much as possible, in the transition process made a positive difference. One mother reflected

that the transition to a residential placement for her daughter had worked well because it was her daughter's choice, she had been positive about it and it had been what she wanted. In addition, a number of professionals supporting one particular young woman said that they were very directed by her choices and wishes and that this in turn had made the process smoother and the placement itself much more likely to succeed:

She was very clear what she wanted – about what she wants now and what she wants in the future. She knows what she wants and that's a good thing.

There were a number of ways in which young people were involved in the transition planning and arrangements: one college had an independent facilitator who worked with the young people to try and gauge their opinions and views about what they wanted for their future; others had classroom-based transition preparation sessions; some young people were taken out to visit a range of potential options for the future; others were invited to decide on furnishings or decorations for their room; some completed transition 'passports' so that new carers could get to know what was most important to them. All of this was considered to make the pathway from the out-of-area residential school or college a more positive process for the young person.

Summary

- In the first stage of data collection, on the verge of transition from school or college, families were asked what they thought helped make a smooth transition. At this stage of the research, parents identified four main themes: being well connected with other parents or with key professionals; being proactive; the provision of information; and good forward planning and allowing adequate time to prepare.
- One year after the first research interviews, parents were asked to reflect on what the 'good' components of their experience had been. Their responses were very similar to, and overlapped with the themes already identified, but in addition, parents considered key components to be good communication and the involvement of young people in their own transition.

5 An action learning programme as a solution-focused response?

Action learning is a 'process' underpinned by a belief in individual potential: a way of learning from our actions (and from what happens to us and around us) by taking the time to question and reflect on this in order to gain insights and consider how to act in future.

(Weinstein, 1999)

'Action learning' was developed in the 1940s by Reg Revans as a management development tool. Although action learning has developed in many different forms since, it is essentially a process in which a group of people come together on a regular basis to help each other to learn from their experiences. Members of the group (called an action learning 'set') select the problems or issues that concern them and on which they will work. They then identify and clarify the problem, and agree a set of actions to take in response to this, with the aim of improving practice.

Action learning is particularly useful when:

- it is necessary to map out ways to deal with new situations;
- it is necessary to test out new ways of working and/or to change the way things are developing;
- a job, role or organisation is changing; and,
- major challenges are being faced
(Action Learning Associates, 2000).

There are many reasons why action learning is thought to be a particularly useful way of learning in these circumstances. First, learning is increased when we are asked questions in order to reflect on the direct experiences of ourselves and others. Second, action learning allows people to question the assumptions on which decisions and actions are based, and to 'think out of the box' in a creative way. Third, action learning forces people to take the initiative for their learning and to seek solutions for themselves – it does not allow people to become passive recipients of 'training' and immobilised by inactivity. Finally, when working on unfamiliar problems in unfamiliar settings, action learning set members have the potential to become free from previous ways of doing things and so develop new ways of thinking.

The action learning programme in the Help to Move On project

As part of the overall project, an action learning programme was established with the aim of addressing some of the particular issues identified in the research. The action learning programme consisted of:

- action learning set meetings, where a multi-disciplinary group of people came together to understand and reflect on the issues and work on improving practice;
- workshops, where information on topics chosen by the people from that particular area was presented.

The action learning programme was organised and facilitated by the action learning coordinator, based at HFT in Bristol.

Following the first round of research interviews, the family carers/relatives interviewed for the project were contacted to discuss whether they would like to be involved with the action learning programme. Those who expressed an interest were invited to meet with the action learning coordinator to discuss how the action learning sets would work, and how to ensure that the parents involved could feel comfortable in attending. It was also an opportunity to explore any particularly difficult issues there may have been between the relatives and any professionals attending.

The professionals interviewed in the first round of the research interviews were also contacted to discuss whether they would like to be involved with the action learning programme.

The action learning coordinator made contact with each of these people by either meeting them in person, or by telephone, letter or email. This was to explain the project and its aims, and the proposed action learning sets, and to ascertain whether they would be interested in participating in the action learning programme. Some were able to participate; others recommended another person to take part whom they considered to be more relevant – these people were then approached. Box 3 shows the composition of the action learning sets.

Box 3: The composition of the action learning sets

People attending regularly

Parents

Connexions service personal advisors

Social workers from adult, children's and transitions teams

Health professionals

Representatives from the LSC

Representatives from the LEA

Specialist college tutors

Representatives from local voluntary sector organisations

People invited, but who did not attend regularly

Some family carers, who were unable to be involved because of time constraints

Transitions workers based at specialist colleges, because of the distance to travel and the time this would incur away from teaching; some contributed to the action learning sets via email or telephone contact

The action learning programme lasted for a 14-month period from 2005–06. Five action learning sets were set up, one in each of the five local authorities taking part in the project⁴. The aim was to meet for a three-hour period every six weeks or so, during term-time only. The original intention had been for the action learning coordinator to facilitate the initial action learning sets, and to then gradually reduce her input to allow the sets to be self-facilitating. This was re-evaluated following feedback from some action learning set members who felt that having an independent facilitator was important for the dynamic of the action learning set. It was also felt by the project advisory group that the time frame did not easily allow for the reduction of input by the action learning coordinator that had been originally planned.

An initial action learning set meeting was held at each site that covered the following:

- introductions to each other;
- an overview of the project;

⁴ Fuller details of the methodology of the action learning sets are given in Appendix 2.

- an explanation of action learning as applied to the Help to Move On project;
- the group producing their own set of ground rules;
- an exercise based on the findings from the research interviews (combined with individual examples from those people present) to identify potential action learning topics for the group;
- the selection and processing of one action learning topic.

After these initial action learning set meetings, a common structure was followed at each meeting in each site. In general, two or three action learning subjects were covered per meeting. For each subject, the following general time structure was used: 10 minutes were spent outlining the issue; 15 minutes allowed for unpacking the issue and discussing suggestions for improvement or possible solutions; 10 minutes for general action planning; and five minutes for individuals to take responsibility for the actions required.

The action learning subjects were chosen by the group, but the group was informed by issues that had been highlighted in the research interviews. Box 4 shows the subjects covered in the action learning sets.

Having identified and clarified the problems, the action learning set members agreed a set of actions to take in response. These actions were largely focused on finding out information, contacting and/or inviting the input of other relevant people, plus visiting a local transition information centre.

Box 4: The subjects covered in the action learning sets

Employment

Housing

Leisure and friendships

The move from children's to adults' services

Financial issues, including self-control of finances and issues around 'chip and pin' technology

Changes in social security benefits

Direct payments

Continued

Support for family carers and siblings of the young person
Transition planning, including person-centred plans
Statements of SEN and their reviews
The role of Connexions personal advisors
Accountability
Eligibility criteria for services
A local transitions information project
A draft multi-agency transition protocol
General issues arising from the transition back home after being in an out-of-area residential school or college

‘Expert’ contributions were received about

Employment opportunities
Housing options
Leisure opportunities

During the action learning programme, participants came across both issues that they, as a group, felt they could not take any further, and observations that they wanted to share with others who had a more strategic or senior management role. In response, each group developed an action plan. This consisted of recommendations and observations, which the group thought should be introduced at the local level, to improve transition pathways for young people with learning difficulties who were being educated in out-of-area residential schools and colleges.

The action plan was revisited as an agenda item at each meeting; issues were also added as they arose from the action learning set topics. At the final action learning set in each site, the group agreed and finalised their action plan; they also identified the key people to take this action plan forward, and who it would be best presented to, such as learning disability partnership boards, commissioning groups or transitions groups. Boxes 5–8 summarise the action plans for four of the project sites. The fifth project site did not complete an action plan. Their action learning set was small and met only twice. Other planned meetings had to be cancelled due to ill health and late changes of plan.

Box 5: Summary of the action plan for site 1

Site 1 action plan

Recommendations

1. That parents of young people with learning difficulties be contacted and invited to meet together and with professionals.
2. That the funding for the transitions information project (a local information centre for young disabled people and their parents and carers, funded by social services and Connexions) be continued.
3. That the current transition pack in use be re-evaluated.
4. That Connexions advisors be involved from Year 9 and be mindful of the need to keep the process realistic and honest.
5. The newly appointed transitions coordinator to action these recommendations.

Box 6: Summary of the action plan for site 2

Site 2 action plan

The process of moving on from out-of-area residential school or college would be improved if:

1. Young people with learning difficulties at residential schools or colleges had a named social care worker to support the students and their families in planning the next steps.
2. Residential schools and colleges started planning for leaving college at least during the students' second year.
3. Residential schools or colleges had information about the resources available back in the home area.
4. Residential colleges with students from site 2 were informed of the Employment Support Service, so that they could involve the service in planning the next steps for young people where appropriate.
5. Students and parents/carers of young people with learning difficulties in site 2 had information about the *Directory of services for people with learning disabilities and their families*.

Continued

6. Parents/carers of young people with learning difficulties from site 2 being educated in out-of-area residential schools or colleges had the opportunity to meet on a regular basis.
7. The arrangements made for young people around money, for example accessing accounts, could be transferable from one setting to another.

Members of the group discussed where the recommendations should go, including the partnership board and senior managers (one member of the planning group was present at the final action learning set).

Box 7: Summary of the action plan for site 3

Site 3 action plan

1. All agencies should use the local People First's *First steps, My Plan*.
2. All agencies should use the transition guide *At a Glance*.
3. The (about to be appointed) transitions worker post should be the transitions champion for site 3, promoting and developing close working links with all relevant agencies.
4. Within each service/agency/trust there should be a named person who is identified as the first point of contact for transition.
5. There should be different age cut-off points for professionals working with young people during transition. It is important that there is some overlap of personnel, so that not everyone stops working with children at the age of 18.

Observation/comments

The needs of parents/carers should be given more consideration as they go through the transition process with their young person.

The action learning set members felt that they would like the opportunity of hearing the debates for and against services being organised along generic or specialist lines.

Box 8: Summary of the action plan for site 4

Site 4 action plan

Recommendations

1. All disabled children placed out-of-area by children's services should come under the looked-after care (LAC) system.
2. The LSC should be involved in planning support for transition, both to and from LSC-funded placements. There should be parity of support for transition between those in LEA-funded and those in LSC-funded places.
3. Each young person placed in an out-of-area special school or college should have a named key worker, or lead professional, to support transition. The young person and their family should at all times know who the key worker is.
4. All young people placed out-of-area should have a person-centred transition pathway that includes a checklist (agreed by all agencies). The key worker's role would be to facilitate the checklist.
5. The age of the young person that transition social workers in site 4 support should be extended beyond 18.
6. There should be an annual review for all young people with needs who have contact with children's services, but who do not have statements.
7. Better forward planning from the Child Development Centre statement onwards should be developed and the information should be shared with families.

Please note: Nationally, 'risk' not 'disability' is now the criteria for eligibility for social care input. These changes may well have an impact on some of the recommendations or observations above.

Reflections on the action learning programme

The views of the action learning coordinator

The action learning coordinator felt that what worked well with the action learning sets was the opportunity it provided for parents and professionals to sit around a table together, to discuss frankly the problems and issues that they, or the young people, had encountered. The professionals attending genuinely valued the accounts

of the families' experiences, and appreciated being able to clarify their roles to each other, and to exchange information. When confidential topics were discussed, there was a feeling of trust within the group, which was considered "a pleasant surprise for such a mixed group of people". Other factors that contributed to the action learning sets working well included: there being a number of family carers at each meeting (so providing a wider breadth of experience and opinion), and there being follow-up from one action learning set to the next, as participants reported back on the actions that they had taken.

There were a number of challenges in arranging and facilitating the action learning sets. Chief among these was their timing: it was not always easy to get people together at the same time; some people preferred to have longer meetings less frequently, while others favoured shorter meetings; the action learning programme could have benefited from taking place over a longer period of time; and, due to the amount of travelling between sites, it would have been advantageous for the action learning coordinator to have had more hours allocated to the work. In addition, one site had no parental involvement in the action learning set and attempts to involve other relevant 'family carer voices' did not succeed.

The views of parents

All of the parents who attended action learning set meetings felt that, through their attendance, they had gained knowledge and information that they would not otherwise have had. One commented:

Some things we've learned because we're involved with the action learning sets ... otherwise we wouldn't know.

In particular, the topic of direct payments was highlighted as being new information for parents that they had not heard about elsewhere.

For a small number of parents, involvement in the action learning sets led to more practical benefits. For some it was an opportunity to liaise directly with one or more of the professionals involved with supporting their son or daughter at transition, and to update each other as to progress. For others it was making contact with other parents or professionals that they would not otherwise have met. One parent believed their involvement led directly to the allocation of a social worker to help steer them through transition. This parent commented that their involvement in the action learning sets had been:

Tremendously helpful. I mean how many times have I said, 'Gosh, what would it have been like if I hadn't been on this project'. I don't know whether we would have survived.

While all of the parents felt that they had gained something from attendance at the action learning sets, there were costs associated with it for some. One parent only felt comfortable going when there was a facilitator present, and said that they “couldn't face it” when they knew a facilitator was not going to be there. Another said that attendance at the action learning sets had made them feel frustrated, because it had highlighted that as parents they were not as well informed as they ought to be. A third parent had found them “depressing” because they had highlighted so many stumbling blocks to a smooth transition.

The issue of the make-up of the group was one that was picked up by a small number of parents. It was apparent that parents felt most supported and confident when there were other parents at the same meeting. One parent commented that even though it was “all quite professional” they had found it difficult sitting next to the head of social services at an action learning set meeting when she was “battling” for a place for the young person concerned.

The views of professionals

Overall, professionals had mixed views of the action learning sets. While some thought that they had “gone well” and that sustainable real changes had come out of them, others wondered about longer-term outcomes and the impact on professionals not involved.

A number of professionals felt that the focus could have been tighter, and that as a learning set they had drifted into discussions about broader issues not within the remit of the project:

We've tried to stay focused on the aim of this project, people coming back into county, but it's digressed a lot to transition, and every now and then it digresses to transition with people in schools, rather than transition of people coming back into county which is what it should be.

In a similar vein, a number of professionals felt that they had often revisited old themes and got stuck on them, instead of moving on. While the themes covered might have been very relevant, they sometimes became repetitive.

Professionals valued the opportunity to take time out and meet with colleagues from different services to discuss the issues. However, one professional commented that the people attending the action learning set he went to tended to be those who were most interested and enthusiastic: people who were likely to already have good links with others. As he explained:

We work together and meet together regularly anyway, and the teams that have been difficult to engage in the action learning sets have also been the ones that we normally have the difficulties bringing in. So that mirrors what happens on a day-to-day basis.

Where professionals who did not usually work together came together in the action learning set, clarifying their roles had been beneficial, as one respondent explained:

I didn't know the Connexions worker had so many cases. She thought I was responsible for sorting out people's benefits, and no that's not my responsibility. So in that respect it's been very helpful because we've been able to clarify each other's roles.

Approximately half of the professionals who reflected on their involvement with the action learning programme were able to give an example of how it had helped them with a particular issue or problem. For some, discussing the issue either within the action learning set, or with colleagues, had been sufficient to help them. In the other cases, it seemed that the action learning sets had mainly served to highlight an issue, provide information, reinforce that action needed to be taken, or steer through changes that were already being made. One professional commented:

We have plans now for a multi-disciplinary transitions team – not only as a result of the action learning programme, but the action learning programme fed into it.

For a small number of professionals, involvement with the action learning programme had resulted in some changes being made to the transition arrangements for young people leaving out-of-area residential schools or colleges. One action learning set member had vowed to change an aspect of his own work routine, as he explained:

One little work routine that I said that I would change, it was a suggestion from a parent, whilst someone is going off to residential college to write to the parent and the young person saying Connexions is still here ... we've got all this information ... to use that as their information resource, and at the same time to write to the college ... to say this is the information base in the county.

Another reported:

I'm looking at actually setting something up for people where they don't have to keep going through the same questions with different people to fill in another form. So looking at whether there can be a document set up that belongs to the person and they can just say, have a copy of this, and this'll answer your questions – like address, date of birth, history, health history. People must get sick of like four people suddenly all coming out one after the other and asking the same questions. So that's going to improve things.

Can an action learning programme work as a solution-focused response?

There is little doubt that the action learning programme was most successful as a way of learning for participants. When asked to rate how effective it had been on a score of 1–5 (with a score of 1 being not at all effective, and a score of 5 being very effective) the average (mean) scores were as follows:

■ as a way of learning	3.2
■ as a way of problem-solving	2.6
■ as a way of taking action	2.7

The quantitative scores reflect the qualitative comments that parents and professionals made when reflecting on the action learning process. Those attending valued the information that they obtained, and professionals often shared their learning with other colleagues. However, unless key decision makers and managers were present at the action learning sets, as well as front-line workers, changes requiring broader involvement and agreement than at an individual level did not happen. Instead, the action learning sets served as a conduit for recommendations to managers.

Two months after the formal end of the project-facilitated action learning sets the action learning coordinator contacted a key member of each action learning set to assess the progress of their action plan. Box 9 identifies the progress made on their action learning set action plan in four of the project sites.

Box 9: The progress made on the action plans in four of the project sites, two months after the end of the meetings

Site 1

The newly appointed transitions manager will be taking the action plan forward to the transitions steering group in late December 2006. She will ensure that it then continues to the learning disability partnership board (the transitions steering group feed directly to the partnership board).

The local transition information project (a drop-in centre) is doing all it can to hold and disseminate information that the action learning set thought relevant.

Site 2

The planning officer for the children's team will take the action plan forward. She has written a report, which will go to the senior managers ('Children and adults interface') meeting. The senior managers are those who would be making decisions regarding service development and changes.

The planning officer for the children's team has written a report to the learning disability partnership board that includes the action plan. The planning officer for the children's team believes that the following are outcomes that have resulted, in part, from the Help to Move On project, and are now in varying stages of development:

1. A pack of information for 17/18-year-olds with a learning disability about what they can expect from adult services. This includes information about housing options and direct payments.
2. A joint database between social care and health, and Connexions, which tracks all 18-year-olds with a learning disability, is being developed.
3. A joint letter from social care and health and Connexions will be sent to the out-of-area residential school/college, the young person and their parents, explaining what support there is in the home area for that young person, giving contact names and details, and who the main person to contact is.

Site 3

The children's services team manager will take the action plan to the learning disability partnership board. The action plan will then be taken on by the newly appointed transitions coordinator.

Continued overleaf

Site 4

The children's services policy officer has agreed to convert the action plan into a paper to present to the commissioning groups and forward this to a colleague in adult services to present to the learning disability partnership board.

As a solution-focused response to the difficulties identified by the research project for young people with learning difficulties at transition from an out-of-area residential school or college, the Help to Move On action learning programme seems to have some positive results, including a vigorous exploration of the issues and a number of changes of practice. Whether this exploration of the issues has been a powerful enough process to continue driving through longer-term change beyond the existence of the action learning programme remains to be seen.

Summary

- The short-term benefits of the action learning sets seemed useful for the participants. The professionals attending often shared their learning with other colleagues. Parents who attended were often not networked with other parents to be able to disseminate their learning in the same way.
- Professionals valued the input of parents at the action learning sets, and the process worked best when there was more than one parent involved.
- In translating learning into sustainable action, action learning sets worked best when key decision makers and managers were present, as well as front-line workers.
- Follow-up of the progress of the action learning set action plans, two months after the formal end of the project-facilitated action learning sets, suggests that an action learning programme can effectively act as a catalyst for change.

6 Discussion and conclusions

In a historical context, transition is receiving much more detailed and focused attention than probably at any other time. This is to be welcomed. While practice among schools, colleges and professionals is not always consistent around helping and preparing young people with learning difficulties to 'move on', we found evidence of lots of energy and resourcefulness in working with young people. That said, it seemed to us that work done in the classroom with young people (around, for example, aspirations, hopes and fears about moving on and growing up), did not always go beyond the classroom. This work did not routinely get fed into meetings, reviews, assessments or plans. Nor was it always shared with everyone who might have been a key person at transition.

Transition to adulthood is changing in general. Young people remain more economically dependent on families for longer, and people enter the labour market, long-term relationships and the housing market later in life than before (Morrow and Richards, 1996; Ferri, 2004). We need to remember this in relation to young people with learning difficulties. This group do, however, need additional support to counteract the general exclusion and discrimination they face in society that may come into stark focus at transition.

The difficulties at transition are exacerbated for young people with learning difficulties in out-of-area placements. Contact with the placing authority – from social workers, educational psychologists or Connexions advisors – appeared fragile where it exists at all. The timely allocation of social workers is problematic. The sometimes acrimonious nature in which the decision to go for a residential placement was reached can also damage some relationships between families and professionals. This can in turn adversely impact at transition if good working relationships are not in place. This study is not designed to comment on the suitability of out-of-area residential placements for young people with learning difficulties. There is clearly a demand for these places and the government has signalled that there is a continuing role for such provision (DfES, 2003, 2004a: 34). In this context, what is crucial is that transition arrangements are as good as they should be for this group and that particular attention is paid to the statutory obligations and good practice guidance to young people with learning difficulties living away from home throughout their time away, and especially at transition.

The process of transition planning

There needs to be more clarity about the process of transition planning. Interviews highlighted, as other research has done, that discussion about transition was often part of annual reviews, or looked-after reviews, or other assessment meetings. While there is nothing inherently problematic with this, it did mean that the level of discussion about action points, plans and young people's wishes was often insufficiently detailed. Several families in the study said they did not have a transition plan. Several others said that they did not know whether they did or not. We suggest that this was in part because discussion was muddled up between ongoing reviews and specific transition planning. Post-school, what is problematic is the lack of statutory responsibility for ongoing transition planning and monitoring. FE colleges, for example, do not have specific duties in relation to transition and planning is inconsistent. We suggest that a longer-term view of transition is needed that takes account of not just the move from school to college, or from child to adult services, but of a life course transition from childhood to adulthood that recognises that, in common with non-disabled young people, it will go beyond the age of 19 and vary from person to person.

As mentioned above, there are some particular problems around the process of transition planning for young people out-of-area. Because of the distance away from home and local professionals, reviews, meetings and perhaps most crucially, relationship building with the young person, are not prioritised. In our study some professionals relied on visiting the young person when they were home in the holidays. This may not give a wholly accurate picture of how the young person feels about being in the two distinctly different settings, and how they might interact with people at school or college.

Families struggle to be as involved as they would like in the mechanics of planning, finding that meetings are scheduled to take place in working hours. We also know from previous research (Abbott et al, 2001) that families are not routinely supported (with help with travel costs) to get to meetings. The young person and their family can lose local networks and knowledge when a young person goes away. Families and local professionals may not know about new and emerging local services. As a result, local professionals may not consider whether these might suit the young person in holidays, when they finish at school or college or indeed, instead of the current residential placement. If transition brings young people with learning difficulties back to the family home then it seems important for them to continue to be borne in mind as local services change and develop.

Our study revealed wide variation in who took the lead on finding out about future placements and options for young people. There are a number of issues here. Families are the natural lead actors, as they usually know their son or daughter far better than any professional and, by and large, have aspirations and expectations of and for their child that can helpfully shape choices. It is also the case that families and natural networks of support are probably at the forefront of decision making for non-disabled young people. So families need to be equipped and supported to take this role not least because families (with the advent of individual budgets) are in effect, the commissioners of the future. To help families currently navigate their way through choices, taking into account the needs of both the young person and their family, much more transparent information needs to be given to families about what is actually available, and crucially, what is likely to be funded. It seems unfair to suggest to families that they are in charge of finding the next step for their child, only to be told later that funds are not available for the option they have in mind. So partnership working with key professionals, including those with financial clout, needs to continue with families being at the core of this. A named key worker might be especially useful in this part of the process as a source of information and advice. *Every Child Matters* (DH, 2003) and *Every Child Matters: Change for children* (DfES, 2004b) both direct local authorities to work together across agencies and to ensure that there is a lead professional who can act as a main point of contact for families. There is evidence of the benefits of a lead, or key worker (Greco et al, 2005) but it would be helpful if this role was extended through the age range with the same person able to support families and young people across the child–adult service divide.

Putting families at the heart of decision making is more likely to mean paying proper attention to the wishes and views of the young person who is the focus of the whole transition. Our research suggests that practice in this area is mixed despite all the policy exhortations to include disabled children and young people. While there was, as we have said, evidence of young people working creatively in the classroom about their hopes and aspirations this did not routinely permeate into plans, reviews and meeting about transition. Nor did the views and experience of ‘care’ or support staff always get fed into official channels. These workers often had strong relationships with the disabled young people but they were only occasionally invited to reviews or meaningfully involved in transition planning. Involving young people over time and more creatively by drawing on ongoing work and reflection in the classroom and in their relationships with other important people in their life – like friends, family and key staff – is a crucial way to involve them, as well as, or instead of, attendance at formal reviews.

Thinking about transition needs to go beyond the classroom for several reasons. One possible benefit would be to enable young people to see and understand the

choices that are available to them. It can be difficult to make choices until you have tried things, seen things, or know about things. A small number of young people in our study seemed to have limited choices, as fairly prescribed pathways were set out for them. Overall, access to the labour market was not considered for the young people either post-school or post-college. Neither did we meet many young people or families that were actively considering direct payments as a way of making more flexible choices about services, choices and support. There was some evidence of young people exploring future life chances in the wider community, for example, visiting colleges, but this was not widespread. We also heard that some colleges preferred prospective students to come just with their parents or staff. Non-disabled young people are more likely to explore options with friends and peers, as well as family. It might be better for both to be possible – for individuals to be able to explore different housing, training, education and work opportunities – as well as being able to find out more with input from important friends and relatives. Giving information about future options could be done more creatively, especially if distance and travel are a problem. Telephone and video conferencing, webcams, digital photographs, all of these could be used to give more information to young people about specific options that could be used in addition to an actual visit.

The timing of transition in relation to securing options that will be paid for by the state, in one form or other, is highly problematic according to the findings of our study. Careful planning can be totally undermined if funding decisions and confirmation of securing and holding placements are left until the eleventh hour, as they often were. In addition, the temptation for placing authorities to put ‘cases’ away in a filing cabinet once everyone is relieved that an initial placement has been found needs to be addressed. Transition from school or college for young people with learning difficulties should not come as a surprise to anyone. Instead, more forward-looking and strategic planning for these young people’s adult lives is required to avoid some of the last moment panic planning that we heard about. We wondered if it was possible for the last year of school, or college, to be an entire transition year, in which leaving dates were more flexible, so that appropriate next-step options could be taken up at a time that suited young people, providers and commissioners.

The outcome of transition

The relationship between the process of planning for transition and the outcomes of transition are far from clear. Some parents said that planning was poor and late, yet at the last minute an option was settled on that everybody felt pretty positive about. Conversely, other families had, more or less, followed a traditional 14+ planning path and still come unstuck with a lack of choice and last-minute decision making.

In terms of respondents' views on what makes for a good transition, "in the end" there were a number of clear messages. Families wanted:

- information on options, processes and entitlements;
- good planning that led to decisions and arrangements that stayed in place as opposed to being changed or cancelled at the last moment;
- less uncertainty and more transparency around funding;
- the young person in question to have good all-round life experiences and chances, especially in relation to independence, confidence, friendships and daytime activities.

Young people themselves valued continuity and 'easier transitions', that is, less stressful, last-minute change. Unsurprisingly, they did not particularly want to go to places where they did not know anyone and where links and relationships with their past were unable to survive. They wanted more attention paid to where their friends were going and more time to visit their next step with people they knew. It would be fairly unusual for a non-disabled person in their teens to make their post-school decisions in isolation from their friends and peers so we should not be surprised that young people with learning difficulties might want to stay close to people and things that are familiar, even if it means limiting their choices somewhat.

To achieve the above, families and professionals also suggested that the following would help:

- *Strong connections:* with other families and helpful, relevant professionals (especially the timely allocation of a good social worker).
- *Families being proactive:* families who took the driving position were more likely to be satisfied with the outcome of transition, but as we have said, families need to be equipped with tools and support to take on this role and where they do not or cannot, the state must assume its role as corporate parent (at the very least for looked-after children) and set about achieving the best outcome possible for young people in out-of-area placements.
- *Information:* we suspect that there is not a shortage of information about transition policy and processes (for just one valuable source of information see the website of the Transition Information Network at www.transitioninfonetwork.org.uk/). The key is how to get this information in accessible formats to families, young people and professionals.

- *Good forward planning*: in particular, overcoming the problems associated with providers and commissioners agreeing things at the last moment.

A lifetime of transitions?

Transition does not end post-school or post-college. However, we did not have a strongly developed sense that much attention was being given to longer-term planning. Although it is not possible not probably desirable, to map out a life course in one stage, it is important to recognise that options like housing, work and relationships should be talked about and explored. The young people in this study did not have a sense of paid work as looming large in their futures. Some parents and professionals cast doubt on the chances of the young people being able to find and keep jobs so perhaps it is not surprising that young people did not especially see this for themselves. From an equalities perspective this is unhelpful. Work can be the best route away from income poverty and can be a helpful bolster to good mental health and social connectedness. The government wants to see more people with learning difficulties in the workplace (Working Group on Learning Disabilities and Employment, 2006) and may continue to tighten eligibility for sickness and disability benefits.

How do we account for the current lack of emphasis placed on employment? It may be a lack of specialist knowledge about ways in which people with learning difficulties can be supported to work (and how this can interact with complicated social security benefits/working tax credits). A lack of engagement with prospective employers may mean that very few of them are able to imagine young people with learning difficulties as potential employees. There are also some very established, non-work routes for people with learning difficulties that amount to ongoing education that arguably do not have clear learning goals or outcomes (although this is changing in the context of *Through inclusion to excellence*, LSC, 2005a and 2005b). Perhaps it is right to have the same expectation of work that is applied to non-disabled young people to young people with learning difficulties. Course content for many young people with learning difficulties often focuses on leisure and/or independent living skills. Such courses are important but are perhaps not enough in their own right, as they may only partially equip young people to access work.

There was one account of a young disabled person whose views about work and the future were deeply affected by meeting a disabled adult who held a professional post. Role models are important, as are mentoring and advocacy support for young people with learning difficulties, and transition plans that adopt a person-centred approach (see, for example, Routledge and Sanderson, undated).

Lessons from the HTMO action learning sets

The process of the action learning sets

The action learning sets posed challenges and opportunities as a forum for driving change and improving transition pathways for young people with learning difficulties in out-of-area placements.

Topics to focus on were generally chosen by the groups themselves, (although the group was informed and guided by issues that had been highlighted in the research interviews). There is potential for tension here. Clearly the action learning sets needed to be addressing issues that were felt to be of importance to them. However, there is the danger that other issues raised by the research interviews (maybe more difficult issues, those requiring more challenging thought, or those needing particularly complex responses) would not have been addressed without a steer from the facilitator.

In terms of what the action learning sets did, actions were largely focused on finding out more information about issues and passing on learning to other people/parents/colleagues. So, as participants acknowledged, there was a good degree of learning going on. However, it was not easy to gauge whether or not the process of learning was iterative, that is, whether people always brought information back to future sessions, or what actually happened as a result of the group gaining information or insights.

One salient question is whether the HTMO action learning sets tried to do too much. Should they 'just' have been set up as a way of increasing people's learning? Or focused more on taking actions forward, or problem solving particular difficulties. It is interesting to note that participants rated 'problem solving' with the lowest score in terms of the effectiveness of action learning sets.

However, the process of arranging meetings to which a mixed audience attended did put people in touch with each other and at an individual level, some issues and problems were rectified and some inter-agency working practices were improved.

The outcomes of the action learning sets

There is a decidedly mixed picture when we look at outcomes for the action learning sets. In terms of progress on action plans continuing once the action learning sets had finished, there is not a great deal of evidence of problem solving or action.

Recommendations continue to make their way through bureaucratic channels that may or may not, in the end, address any of the key research findings that highlight such poor experiences for young people in out-of-area schools and colleges at transition.

What is slightly dispiriting about some of the action points in each of the four action plans is how much there is that is proposed that really should be happening already and that is quite basic stuff. For example:

- One site recommends “That Connexions Advisors be involved from Year 9”. Yet the *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* (2001a) states that the Connexions service is responsible for overseeing the delivery of the transition plan, and the Connexions personal advisor should coordinate its delivery. The annual review in Year 9 is when the transition plan is first drawn up. So, according to the guidance, Connexions should have always been involved.
- Another site recommends that all young people at residential schools should have a named social worker if they are a looked-after child. This is a basic statutory responsibility under the Children Act (1989) designed to safeguard the welfare of vulnerable children who live away from home.
- One site says that schools/colleges should start planning for the young person leaving, at least during their second year. However, they should actually be planning from the age of 14 in schools; colleges should be continuing and adding to the existing plans. Some young people will leave at end of their second year, so leaving planning until then is far too late. (Our study shows the example of one young person who left college in Easter of her second year with no transition planning having taken place).
- Finally, one site adds a postscript to their action plan that higher levels of ‘risk’ are now the only criteria under *Fair access to care* guidance, that is, people have access to social care services (DH, 2002) if they have ‘high’ or ‘substantial’ risks to their independence. This is true but it should not affect the fact that transition planning still needs to take place for these young people, whatever their likely assessment in the future.

Conclusion

This research report sets out the data collected over a two-year period from 15 young people with learning difficulties in out-of-area residential, special schools and

colleges, as well as from their families and the professionals who supported them. It also includes data on the work of action learning sets that was designed to feedback the findings of the research and bring about better transition pathways for a specific group of young people. There is a lot of established literature and research in the field of transition for young disabled people, including people with learning difficulties, but one of the aims of this study was to explore the particular issues for young people living away from home in residential schools and colleges.

Transition planning and outcomes are not perfect for young people with learning difficulties in general, but the distance away from home for the young people in our study was additionally problematic. Lack of strong relationships with professionals from the placing authority coupled with a lack of choices for young people's next steps meant that too many transitions were hurried, subject to last-minute decisions by funders and providers, and perhaps most importantly, sources of immense stress and emotional upheaval for young people and their families.

Our study reveals some clear messages from families, young people and professionals about what could make a difference in overcoming these hurdles. There is no shortage of policy documents and drivers in this field so the difference will only come when there are shifts in practice, attitudes and perhaps, resources. It will require much more commitment to good transition outcomes to ensure that this group of young people are given the life chances that all young people deserve.

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Appendix 1: Research methodology

Research interviews

Following discussions about transition for young people at out-of-area residential schools or colleges at a regional forum, five local authorities agreed to take part in the research. Together, the sites represented a range of characteristics, including a mix of predominantly urban or rural communities, local authorities that were 'importers' or 'exporters' of young people with learning difficulties for residential education and an authority with a significant minority ethnic population.

At each of the five sites, the Connexions service (an advice and support service for young people in the UK) or social services invited young people with learning difficulties thought to be in their final or penultimate year at an out-of-area residential school or college, to take part in the research. The research team then sent interested young people a DVD and written materials about what it might be like to take part in a research project. These had been produced in conjunction with an advisory group of young people with learning difficulties. Throughout, ethical guidelines were followed in the procedures for obtaining informed consent from the young people.

The research was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, 15 young people from the five local authorities took part in the research. The response rate across the five authorities was 39% (range 11–57%). All of the young people consented to the research team talking to their parents about their experiences; the response rate from parents to taking part in the research was 100%. Each of the young people and their families nominated up to five people they thought helped them most in preparing or supporting them through transition. The total number of 'supporters' nominated was 32 (mean per person = 2; range 0–4). All worked with the young people in a professional capacity and are therefore referred to as 'professionals'. Almost all (91%) of the nominated professionals agreed to take part in the research.

During the first half of 2005, first-stage qualitative interviews were conducted with:

- 13 young people with learning difficulties (one young person was too unwell to be interviewed, one was considered to be too upset to participate);
- 16 parents/family members of the young people (one mother and father were interviewed separately);

- 29 supporters of the young people (two of whom were interviewed in relation to different young people).

The second stage of the research took place approximately a year after the first-stage interviews. All of the young people consented to take part in the research again, as did all of their parents and 66% of the professionals. The main reasons why professionals were not interviewed a second time was that they had changed roles, or that the young person had moved on from their service or support and they no longer felt themselves to be a key supporter of the young person. The young people and their families were again able to nominate any other key professionals they thought had helped them most in supporting them through transition. A further 10 professionals were nominated and agreed to take part in the research at this stage.

During the first half of 2006, second-stage interviews were conducted with:

- 14 young people with learning difficulties (one young person refused to be interviewed, but consented for interviews to be conducted with two professionals she named);
- 16 parents/family members of the young people;
- 29 supporters of the young people (two of whom were interviewed in relation to different young people). Of these, 19 had been interviewed during the first stage of the research, and 10 had joined the research project at the second stage only.

The interviews with the young people were conducted at the residential school or college they attended for the first stage of the research, and either there or at their new placement during the second stage. Most took place over two consecutive days. Some of the young people were able to communicate their views verbally and these discussions were tape recorded with consent. Other young people used pictures to indicate their likes and dislikes, hopes and concerns, and notes were kept of these. A third group of young people indicated through their gestures and activities what they liked or disliked and what gave them pleasure. Some of the young people had physical impairments in addition to learning difficulties; some had behaviour thought to 'challenge' services. None of the young people were excluded from the research project, or not interviewed, because of their level of ability or means of communication. A topic guide for these interviews is at the end of this section. This was adapted to suit the individual young person and their needs/communication. All the young people were given a £10 gift voucher at each stage of the research as a thank-you, in recognition of their help.

Interviews with parents⁵ and professionals were held separately from those of the young people, at a convenient time and place for them. These interviews were semi-structured, following a topic guide and covering particular aspects of the transition process (see the end of this section for a topic guide). Each interview took approximately an hour-and-a-half (range half-an-hour to three hours at the first stage; half-an-hour to two hours at the second stage). The interviews were tape recorded with consent, and interviewees given the opportunity to read the transcripts of the tapes and correct any factual inaccuracies. The parents were offered a £10 gift voucher at each stage of the research as a thank-you, in recognition of their help.

All tape recordings were transcribed and, together with any notes, entered into MAXqda⁶, a qualitative data software package. Two researchers independently read all the texts and coded selected text segments into main and sub-themes. A random sample of texts was cross-checked for accuracy and consistency.

Thematic analysis was based on the transcripts. Analysis was undertaken separately for stage 1 and stage 2 of the research, although stage 2 analysis was informed by the findings of stage 1. These were brought together in the final analysis and the report is based on both stage 1 and stage 2 material.

Interview topic guide: Young people

1 The things you do now

How old are you? When is your birthday?

Confirm what school/college at.

How long have you been at ...?

Where were you before you came here?

Tell me about your family – do you have brothers and sisters etc?

Where do your family live?

Do you stay here all the time?

How often do you visit your family? How do you get there?

What are the best things about being here?

What things do you do during the day?

What things do you do in the evening?

What things do you do at the weekend?

5 The term 'parents' used throughout includes one grandparent.

6 Verbatim Software, Berlin (www.winmax.de).

What do you like doing best?
Do you have any special friends here?
Do you like being here? Why?
[Not like about being here – gentle probe]

2 Thinking about growing up

We all have to leave school/college as we grow up.
Has anyone talked to you about what you want to do when you leave ...?
Who was that?

Have you had any meetings about what is going to happen when you leave?
How many?
Who was there?
Did you go? Why not? Did anyone speak up for you?

If you went to the meeting:
Did you understand what was going on?
Can you remember what was said at the meeting?
Were you able to tell the people at the meeting what you wanted to happen?

Do you know if you've got a transition plan? This is a plan that says what you want to happen when you leave school. It says the things that you and other people need to do to make these things happen.
Can you understand it?

There are lots of things to think about when you are moving on from school or college. We want to ask you about some of the different things you might have to think about.

3 Where would you like to live? [prompt with housing pictures]

Do you want to live with your family? Why?
Do you want to live with other people? Who?
Do you want to live on your own?
What sort of house would you like to live in?
Where would you like to live? Why?
Has anyone talked to you about where you would like to live? What did they say?
Have you visited any places to see what they are like?

4 What do you want to do during the day? [prompt with activities pictures]

There are lots of different things you can do during the day like:

Go to a different school or college

Get a job

Go to a day centre

Do other things during the day

What do you want to do during the day when you leave school?

Who can you talk to about this?

5 What do you want to do in your free time? [prompt with leisure pictures]

What sort of things do you like doing in your free time?

Watching TV? Listening to music? Going to the cinema?

Do you like going out with friends?

Do you play any sports? Swimming? Other sports?

Who do you like to do these things with?

Will you be able to do these things when you leave ...?

Is there anyone who helps you to do these things?

Are there new things you would like to try?

Who can you talk to about this?

6 Your health [prompt with health pictures]

Do you have to see the doctor or nurse now for anything?

Do you ever have to go to the hospital to see a doctor?

Do you know if you will see the same doctor when you leave school or college?

Do you take any tablets? Does anyone help you with this?

Has anyone talked to you about having a health action plan?

7 Friends [prompt with friends pictures]

Who are your best friends?

Will you see them when you have left ...?

Do you have any friends where you are going?

Do you want to stay in touch with your friends from ...?

How will you do this? [mobiles, visits, emails]

8 Money [prompt with money pictures]

Who helps you to manage your money at the moment?
Has anyone talked to you about managing money?
Has anyone talked to you about direct payments?
Would you like to find out more about money?
Who can you talk to about this?

9 How will you get around? [prompt with transport pictures]

How do you get around now? Bus? Car? Taxi? Minibus? Walking?
Does somebody help you to get around?
Would you like to be able to get around more?
Would you like to be able to get around on your own?

10 Speaking up for yourself? [prompt with speaking up pictures]

How do you feel about speaking up for yourself?
Have you ever had to do this?
What was easy about doing this?
What was hard about doing this?
Did anyone help you?

Have you ever been to a self-advocacy group? This is a group where people with learning difficulties meet up and support each other to speak up for themselves and make choices.

Would you like to go to one when you move on?

11 Having a girlfriend or boyfriend [prompt with relationship pictures]

Do you have a girlfriend/boyfriend?
If yes, will you be able to see them when you leave?
What sort of things do you do together? Will you be able to do these things when you leave?
If no, would you like to have a girlfriend/boyfriend?
Is there anyone you talk to about things like this?

Ending

Thank you for telling me all these things about yourself and the things you want to do. Is there anything else you'd like to say about growing up?

We would like to come and see you again next year to find out how things are going with your plans. Would this be okay? How can we keep in touch?

Interview topic guide: Families (and slightly adapted for professionals)

Confirm the person's identity, relation to young person, how far or near they live from the young person's residential school/college.

Clarify if the young person is at school or college, what type of placement (eg term-time only or 52-week), how long young person has left at residential school/college.

How did x come to be at a residential school/college? [how/why the residential placement was made. Check if there had been a previous residential placement – if so, from what age]

1 Transition planning

What is the current situation with the young person's meetings?
Have they been review meetings, or specific transition planning meetings?
How many meetings have there been?
Where were they held?

Who attended these? [show checklist]
Does x have a named transition worker? Where are they based?
Were the people attending from the home or placement authority?
Were parents supported to attend? How? Was it useful?

What was x's involvement in the planning process?
Were x's views taken into consideration?
Could he/she be more fully involved?
Any particular issues about differences of opinion between the residential school and any one else about x's views?

Do parents and young person have a copy of a transition plan? Does x have an accessible version? Who else has a copy?

From your perspective, what are the things that work well, and what are the problems/issues with current transition planning arrangements – especially given the distance between the sending and host authorities?

2 Parents' knowledge of transition planning topics

What information have you already received to help you plan what will happen when x leaves residential school/college?

Did you search out this information yourself, or did someone give it to you? If given the information, who gave it, and was it in response to asking for it?

What has been covered/what progress has been made in relation to any of these in the transition planning for x? Ask if the discussions are general, or focus on services/supports in home area or area the residential school/college is in.

- Moving on to FE/work/daytime activities
- Housing options
- Making/maintaining friendships, especially keeping in touch with friends from residential school/college
- Leisure activities, having fun, having a break, holidays
- Sex and relationships
- Transport and travel and safety in getting around
- Technology, aids and equipment
- Money matters, benefits and direct payments
- Move to adult health services
- Move to adult social services
- Being a young disabled person – person-centred planning, advocacy, circles of support

- A carers needs assessment
- Parents changing their own role to that of carer. Do parents think their own role as parent/carer will change when x leaves their residential school/college? If so, how? Has anyone discussed this with them? Who?

Are there any other things you think it would have been helpful to have discussed?

3 Parents' own knowledge of services/supports

Are you confident about your own knowledge about services/supports for x that might be available when s/he leaves residential school/college? Are these services/supports in the home area or in the area of the residential school?

Some people say 'it's not what you know it's who you know' that is important when young people leave residential school/college. Do you agree? Why/why not?

Do you have any contact with the Connexions service? Is it the local Connexions service that is involved with x, or the Connexions service in the area that the residential school is?

4 Communication/funding issues

What are the communication channels between you and the residential school/college?

What are the communication channels between you and the home authority? Between you, education, social services and Connexions?

Do you know what would happen to the funding for x's place at residential school/college if you move home out of your current social services area? Has this ever been an issue for you?

5 Hopes for the future

Do you know what has happened to other young people when they have left the residential school/college x attends?

What are your hopes for what will happen when x leaves residential school/college?

What are x's hopes for what will happen when s/he leaves residential school/college?

What do you realistically envisage will happen at x's transition from residential school or college?

Do you have any particular concerns about this?

Do you think there any special issues (such as the person's behaviour, ethnic background etc) that might impact on x's transition from residential school/college?

Are hopes based on the young person returning to their home authority or staying in the area in which they are at school/college? Why?

What would you like to be happening in three years time?

6 Improving transition

What do you think could be done *generally* to improve the process of transition for young people with learning disabilities at transition from residential school or college? Consider:

- Paperwork
- Funding issues
- Procedures

How would you measure a successful transition for x from their residential placement? What outcomes would you use? [eg employment, independent living, social participation, adult role taking, personal autonomy].

The next stage of the research project will involve working with local authorities, parents and key people at the transition stage to make transition a better experience for people with learning difficulties leaving residential school/college. Are there any particular themes that you would like to see included in workshops or teaching sessions?

What are three key priorities that you think would make the transition from a residential placement a good/better experience?

Do you think there any particular issues for young people placed out-of-area that are different for young people educated within their home county?

Ending

Anything else they want to say that hasn't been covered?

Identify people who have been/are helpful in the transition process.

Explain what happens next. Do parents want notes of interview sent to check through?

Discuss how to keep in contact between now and interview in one year's time.

Involvement with action learning programme.

Appendix 2: Research methodology

The action learning sets

As part of the Help to Move On research project, an action learning programme was established with the aim of addressing some of the particular issues identified in the research. The programme consisted of:

- action learning set meetings, where a multi-disciplinary group of people came together to understand and reflect on the issues and work on improving practice;
- workshops, where information on topics chosen by the people from that particular area was presented.

The action learning programme was organised and facilitated by the action learning coordinator based at HFT in Bristol.

Setting up the action learning sets

For each of the five local authority sites participating in the research, a database was set up of the key people and services who could be involved with young people with learning disabilities going through transition from their out-of-area residential school or college. The roles of the people listed included: team managers of community learning disability teams, disabled children's teams, adult health and disability teams and children and health teams; transitions workers from social services; team managers of the learning disability department of primary care trusts; senior education managers and inclusion coordinators from local education authorities; team leaders and Special Educational Needs coordinators for Connexions; representatives of parent partnership services; regional development manager and regional placement officer for the Learning and Skills Council; employment support worker; principal housing officer; team manager for the looked-after children's team; and senior sports development officer.

The number of potential contacts on the original databases ranged from 6 at one site to 19 at another. The average (mean) number was 16.

Sixty of the 73 people listed on the databases were identified as being appropriate, and were contacted. This was done by meeting them in person, or by telephone,

letter or email. At this initial contact, the action learning coordinator explained the project, its aims and the proposed action learning sets, and ascertained whether they would be interested in participating in the action learning programme. Seventeen of the 60 (28%) people contacted later participated in action learning sets; 36 (60%) sent a colleague, or recommended another person to take part whom they considered to be more relevant; 7 (12%) declined to take part or did not respond.

In addition, the proposed action learning programme was briefly discussed with parents and professionals at the first research interviews for the project. The contact details of those parents and professionals interested in being a part of it were then passed on to the action learning coordinator by the researchers. Nine of the 45 parents and professionals interviewed (20%) did not want to be contacted about the action learning programme activities.

At two of the sites there were more than two sets of relatives who expressed an interest in the action learning programme. Meetings were held for them, in order to introduce the parents to each other, explain how the action learning sets would work, and try to ensure the parents involved felt as comfortable as possible about attending. It was also an opportunity for them to explore any potentially difficult issues that there may be between the parents themselves and the professionals likely to be attending the action learning programme.

At the remaining three sites, the action learning coordinator individually contacted, or met with, the parents who had expressed an interest in being involved with the action learning programme. Two sets of parents agreed to take part and the other two declined.

The professionals interested in being a part of the action learning programme were contacted individually. Of the 29, 13 (45%) attended action learning set meetings, and a further two sent colleagues in their place. A third of the remaining professionals were involved at 'arm's length', such as through telephone or email contact regarding at least one action learning set.

Action learning sets

The first action learning set meeting at each of the five sites was arranged with care to ensure that the venues, times and dates were convenient for as many people as possible. Each meeting followed a similar format. This consisted of:

- introductions to each other;
- an overview of the project;
- an explanation of action learning as applied to the Help to Move On project;
- the group producing their own set of ground rules;
- an exercise based on the findings from the research interviews (combined with individual examples from those people present) to identify action learning topics for the group;
- the selection and processing of action learning on one topic.

Each action learning topic had a time structure to guide it: 10 minutes to outline the issues, 15 minutes for coming up with solutions, 10 minutes for action planning and five minutes to agree individual actions.

At each subsequent action learning set meeting, the group revisited the previous meeting's action learning topics, to follow up the actions taken on this. At most meetings, up to three action learning topics were explored. Sometimes local 'experts' were invited to attend an action learning set meeting, to contribute to the learning. In some groups the 'experts' stayed as part of future action learning sets; in others their contribution was limited to the specific subject for which they had been invited.

At each action learning set the participants were asked to complete a feedback form. The action learning coordinator used the responses to help decide the subjects for the information workshops and to make any necessary improvements to future action learning sets. They were also used by the research team to help evaluate the action learning programme as a whole.

Information workshops

Four half-day information workshops were provided by HFT, to which action learning set members and a wider audience were invited. These workshops were intended to give participants of the action learning sets an opportunity to get more in-depth information on topics that had been identified during their meetings. Two of the action learning sets came together for two of the workshops: these workshops focused on housing options, information on funding streams for housing, direct payments, employment opportunities and social security benefits. The remaining three action

learning sets joined together for the other two workshops: these focused on employment options and the disability equality duty. Box 10 provides an overview of the range of workshop speakers.

Box 10: The range of action learning programme workshop speakers

- Young people with learning disabilities and their supporters
- Diversity officer from local county council
- Project worker from a local advocacy service
- Contracts manager from a local employment project
- Vocational support officer from community employment services
- Occupational therapy lead for a local NHS trust
- Disability employment advisor from Jobcentre Plus
- Social services planning and development manager
- Adult community care services development manager
- Finance and benefits team manager from a local trust
- Housing advice worker
- Representative from a service that helps to broker direct payments
- Revenue manager from HFT
- Independent Living coordinator

At each workshop, each speaker gave a presentation and then provided opportunities for questions and discussion. Handouts and other relevant material were available for participants to take away. The workshops were for a wider audience. Action learning set members and non-members participated. Attendees included: family carers and their friends; social workers; transitions workers; health workers; employment support workers; residential college staff; project workers and representatives from the Connexions service.

Action plans

During the course of the action learning programme each group developed an action plan. This consisted of recommendations and observations that the group thought should be introduced at the local level to improve transition pathways for young people with learning difficulties from the area who lived in out-of-area residential schools and colleges. The action plan was revisited as an agenda item at each action learning set meeting and added to as appropriate.

At their final action learning set each group agreed and finalised their action plan, identified the key people to take it forward and where to take it (for example, partnership boards, commissioning groups, transitions groups). These action plans are now ongoing.

The action learning programme was evaluated by the researchers from the Norah Fry Research Centre at the University of Bristol. The evaluation was based on feedback forms from action learning set meetings and workshops, questionnaires distributed to action learning programme participants about their perceptions of its effectiveness, and face-to-face or telephone conversations with participants about their more general views of the programme.

Further information

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