

Help to Move On

Better pathways at transition for young people with learning disabilities in residential schools and colleges

The 'Help To Move On' project involved researchers from the Norah Fry Research Centre at the University of Bristol, and HFT (Home Farm Trust) working with five Local Authorities in the South West of 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 'out-of-county' 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 research:

- **Data collection.**

Fifteen 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-county 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 (ALS)**

Professionals and parents in each of the five sites came together in an ALS which met approximately 6-weekly. The purpose of the ALS was to engage people in a process of:

- Understanding the key issues relating to young people with learning difficulties moving on from out-of-county residential schools/colleges
- Forming and initiating an Action Plan
- Reflecting on progress in addressing the issues

From time to time, 'experts' on particular topics were invited to contribute to workshops to provide the underpinning knowledge that members of the ALS felt they needed. The workshops were also open to a wider audience.



Action Research 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.

The research was guided by a multi-disciplinary Research Advisory Group, and two Advisors with learning disabilities.

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. The research needed to take account of this.
- In terms of young people being out-of-county 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-county 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 didn't feel that they really knew the young person concerned and what their own 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 i.e. 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-county residential school or college placement gave rise to, the 'ideal case' scenario was that the next placement should be identified approximately three months before the young person was due to leave their school/college.

Improving transition

- There was a 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 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.

The experience of transition

- Parents and professionals all considered that leaving the out-of-county 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-county 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-county 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 whilst moving onto new day-time opportunities, so keeping one aspect of life stable; and staying at the new placement for gradually increasing lengths of time.

Action Learning Sets

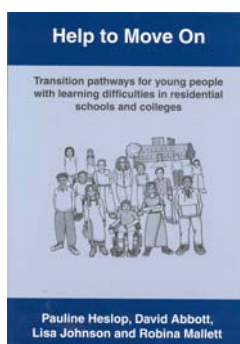
- The short-term benefits of the Action Learning Sets seemed useful for the participants. The professionals attending often shared their learning with other colleagues. Parents who attended were often not networked with other parents to be able to disseminate their learning in the same way.
- Professionals 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.



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How to get further information



Help to Move On
Transition pathways
for young people
with learning
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Copies are available free of charge from the Norah Fry Research Centre
Tel: 0117 331 0987

The full report can also be downloaded at

www.bristol.ac.uk/norahfry/online.html

Further copies of this summary can be viewed or downloaded at

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