

Transitions to adult services by disabled young people leaving out of authority residential schools

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Evidence suggests that poor transition planning and outcomes feature too often in the transitions of disabled young people from children's to adult services. Moreover the transitions of disabled young people leaving out of authority residential school placements can be even more problematic than the transitions of young people living with their families and attending local schools. Improving disabled young people's transitions to adult services and adulthood is now a government priority. Interviews with staff and managers working in children's services (education, health and social care), adult social care, Connexions and transition teams were used to explore how transitions from out of authority residential schools to adult services are currently managed. The study also identified factors which appear key to the transition process and its outcomes.

- Local authorities reported using the same over-arching protocols and procedures in managing transitions for all disabled young people. In practice, however, there were some specific differences between in authority and out of authority transition planning.
- In addition to specific barriers to transition planning faced only by disabled young people in out of authority schools, the generic difficulties associated with transitions for all disabled young people appeared magnified for this group.
- Transition outcomes for this group were also affected by factors specific to out of authority placements, such as the young people's lack of familiarity with services and opportunities in the home authority, and the fact that they are less well known by staff.
- Most interviewees believed that positive transition outcomes from residential out of authority schools were harder to achieve than transitions from special schools in the home authority, and that post-transition care packages and/or placements were less secure and more likely to break down.
- Changes in transition practices such as making person centred planning a requirement of placement contracts were perceived as having the potential to support smoother transitions and more positive long term outcomes. However, few instances of person-centred planning were identified and staff noted that adopting this approach was harder for young people in out of authority schools.

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Background

Out of authority special schools are non-maintained or independent schools located within or outside a local authority's boundaries. Estimates suggest there are currently around 1,000 disabled children and young people in 38 or 52 week residential placements in out of authority special schools in England.

Previous research suggests the transitions of disabled young people leaving residential school placements and transferring into adult services can be even more problematic than the transitions of disabled young people living with their families and attending local schools. Improving transitions to adult services and adulthood for disabled young people is now a government priority.

This small scoping project focused on transitions by disabled young people in 38 or 52 week placements in out of authority schools into the adult services of their home authority.

The study aimed to identify:

- differences in transition planning practices for disabled young people in residential schools compared to young people attending local, local authority special schools
- the factors which impact on transition planning and transition outcomes for these young people
- key areas for future research and the feasibility of such research.

Findings

Similarities and differences in out of authority and in authority transitions

Overall, local authorities reported using the same protocol and procedures in managing transitions for all disabled young people. However, some specific differences between in authority and out of authority transition planning processes were described including: the involvement of adult social care services with out of authority disabled young people at an earlier age compared to in authority cases, the use of specific out of authority posts or roles to work on social care or health transitions, and the use of low levels of person centred planning (PCP) for those in out of authority schools, even by local authorities who used PCP extensively within their authority.

A gap in the evidence on health transitions

The project identified a lack of evidence on how health care transitions (other than those covered by learning disability teams) were managed. The research highlighted a lack of clarity and degree of confusion regarding the management of, and responsibility for, health transitions.

Specific transition issues faced by out of authority disabled young people

Specific factors were identified that could interrupt or impede the transitions of those leaving residential out of authority schools:

- The fact that a young person's health care was being transferred between authorities could cause delays and difficulties. For example, health care professionals were not typically allowed to work outside of their authority, precluding health care professionals from the home authority from carrying out assessments prior to the young person returning to the home area. Moreover, confusion about who was responsible for funding and health assessments led to delays which impacted on transition planning processes. Further problems were caused by a lack of, or delayed, access to school-held health information by the home authority.

Box 1: Factors affecting transition outcomes

Factors specific to young people in out of authority schools

- Decisions to place in an out of authority school can fail to take account of longer term outcomes.
- Institutionalisation and difficulties transferring independence skills.
- Geographical distance at the time of deciding on placements.
- Transitions back to the family home can demand significant readjustments.
- Complete loss of social networks.

Generic factors magnified for those in out of authority schools

- The amount and extent of change.
- The complexity of need.
- Unmet health care needs.

- The independent nature of residential special schools had the potential to leave local authority staff with little leverage in terms of changing transition planning practice. School staff were not necessarily skilled in, or required to adopt, new ways of working such as person centred planning.
- Related adult residential provision at the school could create tensions between the business interests of the school and the local authority staff's view on the best interests of the young person.
- Geographical distance between the home authority and the school resulted in fewer visits by home authority staff during the transition planning process compared to the number of visits made to local special schools. Home authority staff believed this impacted on the extent to which they knew the young people and on the quality and effectiveness of their working relationships with school staff.
- A lack of the longer term view of the child's life at the time of making the placement resulted in ambiguity about non-educational outcomes. This meant that strategic involvement of adult social care was limited and this inhibited the planning and development of adult services for young people returning from out of authority schools.
- Involving the young person in decision-making was hampered, especially for those in 52 week placements, by the young person's lack of familiarity with their home authority both as a place and in terms of the services it provided.

Generic transition issues magnified for out authority disabled young people

In addition to the specific issues thrown up when planning and effecting transitions for young people in out of authority schools, generic difficulties associated with transitions for all disabled young people appeared magnified for this particular group:

- While local authorities appeared confident that disabled young people in out of authority schools were no longer at risk of being forgotten by the home authority, none were totally confident that adequate systems were in place to ensure transition teams and/or adult social care services would be involved in transition planning for all disabled young people placed in out authority schools. Those most likely to slip through the net were children placed out of authority for the primary reason of child protection and who therefore may not be on the disabled children team's caseload.
- Accessing the views of young people in residential placements was viewed as particularly challenging due to complexity of need, such as severe learning difficulties and/or autistic spectrum disorders. The fact that, due to their geographical distance, the young people in out of authority placements were less familiar with staff made accessing their views even more difficult.
- Difficulties with resolving funding responsibilities for adult services was more likely for those in out of authority schools due to the increased complexity of need in this group.

Factors affecting the transition outcomes of out of authority placements

The majority of interviewees believed that positive outcomes of transitions from residential out of authority schools were harder to achieve than transitions from local (in authority) special schools, and that adult care packages and/or placements were less secure and more likely to break down. Interviewees highlighted a range of factors which increased the risk of poorer outcomes. Some of these factors were unique or specific to young people in out of authority schools. Other factors, while possibly true for any disabled young person transferring to adult services, appeared magnified for those from out of authority schools (Box 1).

Implications for practice

Much potential exists for transition planning and transition outcomes for disabled young people in out of authority residential schools to be problematic. On one hand, some of the factors cannot be dealt with by changes to policy or practice; for example, reducing the geographical distance of placements is not necessarily feasible given the increasingly specialist needs of the children and young people involved. On the other hand, this study highlights several areas where changes in practice could support smoother transitions and more positive long-term outcomes of these transitions.

Earlier than usual active involvement in transition planning by adult social care staff appears to improve the transition process and is therefore to be recommended. Moreover, the existence of local authority posts with a specific responsibility for individuals placed out of authority appears to overcome barriers which geographical distance can impose on meeting with young people and school staff.

An inequity currently exists in the extent to which person centred planning approaches are being used with young people attending out of authority schools compared to their peers in local special schools. To remedy this, local authorities could make person-centred planning a requirement of placement contracts with schools.

Systems should be developed by which adult social care agencies are made aware, at an early stage, of those in out of authority schools and their projected needs for adult social care services. Earlier involvement of adult health services is also required as, in some cases, no clear transition pathway from children's to adult health services appears to exist. Better joint working between children's services and adult disability/health teams is required.

Finally, the social needs of young disabled people should play a more prominent role in transition assessments and planning, and in the package developed to support young people returning to their home authority. A lack of ownership of this issue seems to be a key barrier to addressing an issue of critical importance to young people.

Methods

Qualitative interviews were carried out between March and July 2008 in ten local authorities in England. We selected the local authorities to represent different types of local authority and rural/urban locations. We interviewed a total of 38 staff based in these local authorities from children's services (disabled children's team, education, child health), Connexions and adult social care services. Interviewees ranged from managers and frontline staff to senior strategic managers or commissioners working for the local authority or Primary Care Trust. All participants played an active role or had some involvement in the transitions of young people returning from residential placements in out of authority schools. Interviews covered topics including the transition planning process, involvement of parents and young people in transition planning, facilitators/barriers to ensuring smooth transition and good outcomes of transition. Detailed notes of these audio-recorded interviews were organised under theme headings for further summary and analysis.

Further information

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