



executive summary

young people with special educational needs/learning difficulties and disabilities: research into planning for adult life and services

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The transition to adulthood for young people with special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, often referred to in post-16 contexts as learners with learning difficulties and disabilities (LLDD), is known to be difficult and not always entirely successful (Sloper et al., 2010; 2011).

In March 2011, the Department for Education published a Green Paper, *Support and Aspiration: A New Approach to Special Educational Needs and Disability – A Consultation* (DfE, 2011) that makes wide-ranging proposals relating to the concerns of children and young people with SEN, learning difficulties or disabilities (LDD), their families and the professionals who work with them. This research was commissioned by the LG Group to inform their response to that Green Paper. The research aims to shed light on how young people with SEN or LDD have been prepared for adult life and adult services, and where the process of planning for this transition might be improved. The research looked at policy and practice in six local authorities, through interviews with 49 professionals, parents and young people. The key findings from these interviews are set out in this executive summary.



Planning for young people's futures

Approaches to preparing young people for adult life and planning their transition vary across local authorities. Many of the professionals supporting young people appear to focus on transition points (such as out of post-compulsory education), rather than seeing transition planning as a seamless journey.

The meaningful involvement of young people and parents or carers is the key to successful transition planning. Professionals felt that parents vary in their willingness and ability to be involved and pointed out that young people can be at odds with their parents. Parents suggested that professionals are not always well placed to gauge whether their child is capable of making complex decisions about their future.

Parents reported a general lack of good and timely information, advice and guidance about how to plan for their child's transition to adulthood. Professionals also reported struggling to fulfil their obligations in terms of transition planning due to limited capacity and high staff turnover.

Transition to post-compulsory education and/or training

Entry-level courses and foundation learning programmes at further education (FE) colleges appeared to be the default destination at the end of compulsory education for young people with low to moderate needs. Some parents and local authority staff concluded that FE courses are not always well suited to young people's needs and not all young people receive an appropriate level of challenge.

FE courses were, however, seen to offer young people a greater level of independence than schools, and opportunities both to maintain contact with friends and access a wider social network.

A change of learning environment for post-compulsory education introduces new challenges. Some parents are fearful about the transition, others struggle with the idea that a full-time college placement typically provides only three days of structured activity per week.

Transition to employment

Whilst many of the young people expressed interest in entering employment, adult interviewees identified a number of barriers to them doing so. These include:

- low expectations
- a lack of opportunities and support to develop essential skills
- employer discrimination.

Several local authorities had attempted to raise the expectations of families and schools, and ensure that employment was discussed with young people. A number had successful supported-employment projects, but these could only accommodate small numbers of young people and, due to a reliance on time-limited funding streams, had uncertain futures.

Transition to independent life

Young people expressed ambitions very similar to those of their peers without SEN or LDD: to have their own home, a car and a full social life. However, discussions about these ambitions were not always followed up with the actions required to realise them.

Some local authority interviewees and parents felt that young people are leaving mainstream or special schools less prepared for independence than they should be as a result of insufficient opportunities for challenge and development.

Developing approaches to transition

Initiatives recently established by local authorities to support the smooth transition of young people into adult life and services included:

- establishing multi-agency transition panels and teams
- employing transition champions and key workers
- implementing person-centred transition planning
- undertaking development work with parents and schools.

Conclusion

Professionals, parents and young people all identified historic weaknesses in transition arrangements for young people with SEN or LDD. These resulted in relatively few young people being systematically prepared for adult life. This has clear implications for the quality of life experienced by young people with SEN or LDD and their families. However, there is evidence that services and practices are developing, with positive outcomes for some young people. The changes proposed in the Green Paper (DfE, 2011) have largely been welcomed.



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