

views of young people with special educational needs and their parents on residential education

Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Executive summary	v
Policy context	v
Key findings	v
Conclusions and implications	v
Evidence base	vi
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Policy context	1
1.2 Research aims	2
1.3 Recruitment and research ethics	2
1.4 The evidence base and research process	3
1.5 Report structure	4
2 Views on residential education	5
2.1 Views of current placements	5
2.2 Role of residential schools and colleges in the future of their students	8
3 Why choose residential education?	9
3.1 Why did the young person change placements?	9
3.2 What did parents consider when choosing the school or college for their child?	9
3.3 Deciding between residential and day provision	10
4 Experiences of the placement process	12
4.1 Parents' views on the placement process	12
4.2 Perceived barriers in the placement process	14
5 Suggested improvements to the placement process	16
6 Summary and conclusions	19
References	20
Appendix	21

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Executive summary

Policy context

Providing for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) or a disability was the subject of the Green Paper, *Support and Aspiration: A New Approach to Special Educational Needs and Disability – A Consultation* (DfE, 2011). The Green Paper seeks to improve the support provided by the current education, health and social care systems for children and young people with additional needs. Residential education is an important part of this system, particularly for children and young people with complex needs.

This report explores families' experiences of residential education for young people with SEN or a disability, and their views on the placement process. The research was commissioned by the Local Government Group as one of three projects looking at issues relating to young people with SEN or disabilities.

Key findings

Parents and young people valued their residential education placement. All of the families interviewed had a child with complex needs, and for this group of young people, parents felt that residential education offers a wider range of opportunities, skills and support than is available in mainstream or day provision in special schools. Parents felt that the development of young people's independent living skills outside normal school hours is a particular strength of residential schools and colleges.

Factors that influence parents' decisions about their child's school include the ability of the school or college to meet their child's needs, the quality of education, the availability of specialist care (including the experience and qualifications of staff), the opportunities for developing independent living skills and their child's own preference.

Many parents said they found the placement process stressful. Most parents said they did not feel well informed about their child's options and had to search

for information themselves. In addition, several said they had 'fought' with the local authority (LA) in order to secure a place in a residential school or college for their child (for example, through tribunals). When asked for their views on LA information and support, just over half of the parents interviewed considered this unsatisfactory: they found the system confusing and felt there was too much focus on cost. A fifth of parents interviewed said they were satisfied with the support and information from the LA: they felt they had been listened to and had their preferences taken into account during the decision-making process.

Parents identified a number of ways in which the placement process could be improved:

- keep the focus on the young person and their needs rather than funding
- provide better information and support for parents
- devise a simpler and more transparent placement system
- ensure effective multi-agency working to reduce funding issues and improve communication with parents
- improve early identification and assessment to prevent the need for support later in a young person's life
- increase the availability of suitable provision for young people with complex needs.

Conclusions and implications

The 2011 SEN and disability Green Paper proposes giving parents and families more choice of schools, more control and more responsibility. This research shows that parents value being able to express a preference and want their views to be heard in the placement process. However, any new initiatives that give more control and responsibility to parents need to

be accompanied by clear and balanced information and support. Changes need to be implemented in such a way so as to avoid overburdening families with a child with complex or challenging needs.

In addition, parents suspected that placement decisions are often led by the availability of funding rather than a young person's needs. This means that LAs need to demonstrate to parents that securing the most appropriate education and care for the young person is of primary importance to them too.

Evidence base

This report is based on interviews with 25 parents who have a child at a residential special school or college. One parent had two children at a residential school, so there are 26 young people in the evidence base. The report includes the parents' views as well as their assessment of what their children think. Seven of these young people were interviewed in person.

1 Introduction

Providing for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) or a disability was the subject of the Green Paper *Support and Aspiration: A New Approach to Special Educational Needs and Disability – A Consultation* (Department for Education [DfE], 2011). The Green Paper seeks to improve the support provided by the current education, health and social care systems for children and young people with additional needs. Residential education is an important part of this system, particularly for children and young people with complex needs.

In this report, we present the findings from interviews with families about their experiences of residential education for young people with SEN or a disability, and their views on the placement process.

This research project was commissioned by the Local Government Group as part of a suite of projects looking at issues relating to young people with SEN or a disability. The other two projects are also being published in 2011: the first relating to local authorities' (LA) views on how the Green Paper will impact on families (George *et al.*, 2011) and the second relating to the transition of young people with special educational needs/learning difficulties and disabilities to adult life and adult services (Martin *et al.*, 2011).

1.1 Policy context

The 1996 Education Act (England and Wales. statutes) requires LAs to assess and provide for children with SEN in their area. SEN includes a broad range of needs including specific learning difficulty, moderate learning difficulty, severe learning difficulty, profound and multiple learning difficulty, behavioural, emotional and social difficulty, speech, language and communications needs, hearing impairment, visual impairment, multi-sensory impairment, physical disability and autistic spectrum disorder (DfE, 2010).

A statement¹ of SEN is produced by an educational psychologist and outlines the pupil's special educational needs, special educational provision, non-

educational needs and provision, and placement. The statement should take account of educational, medical and psychological needs, and any other relevant factors. Based on the needs assessment and SEN statement, the LA recommends placement in a particular school.

In 2010, the DfE reported that 2.7 per cent of the school-aged population in England had a statement of SEN. Of this group, 55 per cent attended maintained primary or secondary schools, 38 per cent attended maintained special schools, six per cent were educated in independent schools or non-maintained special schools, and one per cent in a pupil referral unit. However, there was no information about how many of these children and young people were in residential education. Research undertaken by Pinney (2005) on behalf of the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) estimated that at that point there were 13,300 children with disabilities in long-term residential placements across health, social care and education settings. Of these, 6100 children with SEN were boarders in maintained mainstream and special schools and non-maintained special schools; 3400 children with SEN were boarders in independent schools; and 2100 disabled children were in social services supported residential provision.

LAs make decisions about school and college placements according to the SEN Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) in consultation with parents and schools. LAs are responsible for placing young people in schools that adequately meet their needs. For educational placements, mainstream schools are always preferred by LAs, if possible, and the 2005 Disability Discrimination Act (England and Wales. statutes) gives parents the right for their child to attend a mainstream school, although they can also state a preference for a maintained special school or a residential school, if they wish. However, if mainstream schools are not considered suitable for meeting the needs of a child, LAs have a legal responsibility to provide an alternative appropriate educational placement. The SEN Code of Practice says that a

residential school is likely to be considered by an LA where there is multi-agency agreement that a child:

- has severe or multiple SEN that cannot be met in local day provision
- has severe or multiple SEN that require a consistent programme both during and after school hours that cannot be provided by parents with support from other agencies
- is looked after by the LA and has complex social and learning needs, and the placement is joint-funded with social services
- has complex medical needs as well as learning needs that cannot be managed in local day provision and the placement is joint-funded with the health authority.

In these situations, the SEN Code of Practice recommends a multi-agency plan is put in place which enables three-way funding between health, education and social services. The effectiveness and appropriateness of the placement must be reviewed regularly.

If it is agreed that a residential school is to be named in the statement of SEN, parents and the LA also agree arrangements for family contact and any special help required to maintain contact, such as transport. If a child is attending a residential school for longer than three months, the LA must also inform the social services department either where the family lives or where the residential school is; it is good practice to inform both.

Not all LAs have their own schools for children with very severe and complex special educational needs and indeed, provision for young people with complex needs varies throughout England. LAs are encouraged to make arrangements across local boundaries where necessary, and to consider placements in independent and non-maintained schools. Such a placement would only be considered if appropriate provision could not be made within the local maintained sector. Parents can choose to send their child to a fee-paying independent school at their own expense but the LA would still retain responsibility for annual reviews of the child's statement.

Some research has been completed with young people attending residential schools in the past. For example, an Ofsted survey (2009) of 338 young people in residential special schools found that young people identified activities and trips (64 per cent), being with friends (26 per cent) and the staff (17 per cent) as the three best things about their school. Feeling homesick was the worst thing about living in a residential special school (41 per cent). McGill *et al.* (2005) reported that while parents of young people attending 52-week residential schools were on the whole happy with their child's residential placement, there were challenges including difficulties in maintaining contact, poor outcomes for children and young people, and the risk of child abuse. McGill *et al.* also said that parents reported receiving little assistance from LAs in maintaining contact with their children.

1.2 Research aims

The purpose of this research was to explore the views of families with a child with SEN aged 11–25 in residential education. Specifically, the areas of interest were views on: the residential placement of the child and the quality of provision; the placement process and the support received from the LA.

The remit of the research did not include families with a child with SEN in non-residential provision (be that specialist or mainstream), including those with a child with SEN who had tried but failed to gain a place in a residential school or college. It also did not include looked-after children. Consequently, we cannot draw inferences about the views or experiences of these groups.

1.3 Recruitment and research ethics

There were two stages to recruiting families to participate in this research.

In Phase One, families were recruited through LAs, who identified families with a child aged between 11 and 18 years placed in a residential educational setting. The LAs contacted the families on our behalf so that their identities remained anonymous until they agreed to participate. Parents were then able to contact the researchers directly and complete a consent form if

they wished to take part. The research was submitted to and agreed by the research governance/ethics board in the LA that requested this.

Parental consent was required in order to contact the young person's school, where all interviews with the young people were conducted. The team obtained agreement from the young people and their schools before the interviews took place. Information sheets describing the research were adapted as necessary for the young people, and sent either in advance or taken to the interviews. Interviewees were advised that they could stop the interview at any time. The interview materials were adapted to each young person's needs and support was provided as necessary (also see section 1.4).

Phase Two was triggered by a low response from the first phase. The research team sent information about the project to residential schools and colleges via two member associations, the National Association of Independent Schools and Non-Maintained Special Schools (NASS) and the Association of National Specialist Colleges (NATSPEC). At this stage, only parents were invited to participate because of time limitations, but they were asked what they thought their child's views were. The criteria for families to participate were broadened in Phase Two to include families with young people between the ages of 11 and 25 attending a residential school or college.

The method of approach in both phases was the same; LAs and schools were asked to send information to parents that requested interested parents to contact the research team directly. This avoided issues of data protection but raised some issues in terms of self-selection of participation, meaning that the views expressed by parents interviewed for this study are not necessarily representative of other parents whose children are attending residential special schools or colleges.

The LAs that assisted with recruitment in Phase One of the research also provided some background information about the placement process in their area. A summary of this information can be found in the Appendix.

Data from all participants was anonymised and no individual or LA is identified in this report.

1.4 The evidence base and research process

This report is based on interviews with 25 parents who have a child at a residential special school or college. One parent had two children at a residential school, so there are 26 young people in the evidence base. The report includes the parents' views as well as their assessment of what their children think. Seven of these young people were interviewed in person.

The families were from 19 different LAs. Interviews were carried out between March and June 2011. Parent interviews were conducted by telephone.

The seven young people who were interviewed had a range (and in most cases a combination) of different SEN including autism, Asperger syndrome, visual and hearing impairment, complex physical needs, learning difficulties, epilepsy and dyslexia. Four had emotional and behavioural difficulties (some in combination with other SEN). All were able to communicate at least a little, although this was very limited for two young people. Where the young people needed support to answer questions, this was provided by their school. The research team conducted interviews with most of the young people using a semi-structured interview schedule. One young person preferred to complete a paper version of the interview.

The children of the remaining parents who took part in the research in Phase One did not participate for two reasons: their needs were such that their parent said they would not be able to communicate (for example, combinations of dyslexia, dyspraxia, epilepsy, speech and language problems, severe learning difficulties, autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), behavioural problems, deafness, blindness and cerebral palsy); or the parents did not give their consent. Interviewing parents minimised the risk of excluding families with a young person with very complex needs who could not take part in an interview themselves.

Profile of the families that participated

- The age range of the young people was 11–24 years.
- Almost all young people had been in their current placement for between one month and three years.

One young person had been at their school for seven years, but was currently going through transition process to college.

- Sixteen of the young people were male and ten were female².
- Fifteen young people attended a school, 10 attended a college, and one lived in a residential home having recently moved from a college^{2,3}.
 - Of the young people attending a school, 14 young people attended from Sunday/Monday to Friday; only one had a full-time (52-week) placement including holidays.
 - Of the young people attending a college/residential home – one young person attended from Monday to Friday; eight only went home in the holidays; and two were a full-time (52-week) placement (although some parents chose for their children to go home for holidays and some weekends).
- Of the 25 families involved in the research, young people from 18 families were placed in residential education in an LA away from their home, and seven were placed in their own LA.

1.5 Report structure

Chapter 2 reports how parents and young people view their current residential placement, and Chapter 3 looks at why families choose residential education for their child. The report goes on to explore the families' experiences of the placement process in Chapter 4. Parents' suggestions for how the system could be improved are in Chapter 5. Finally, Chapter 6 contains the summary and conclusions.

Notes

- 1 Pupils with SEN can also be supported through *School Action* or *School Action Plus* which are mechanisms for supporting children and young people with SEN outside of a school's usual approach to differentiating the offer for pupils. The families in this report had children with complex needs and had statements of SEN rather than School Action or School Action Plus.
- 2 These figures include the siblings and therefore total 26 young people from 25 families.
- 3 The family with a young person in a care home spoke about their experiences relating to the residential college rather than the care home.

2 Views on residential education

This chapter explores how the young people and parents viewed their current residential placement; in particular, the extent to which the provision meets the young person's needs and how residential schools and colleges are preparing young people for the future.

Summary of findings

- Parents and young people are positive about their residential placement, and residential education as an education model for young people with complex needs.
- All of the parents interviewed had children with complex and challenging needs, and for this group of young people, it appears that residential education offers a wider range of opportunities, skills and support than would be available in mainstream or special schools with day provision.
- In particular, parents felt that the development of young people's independent living skills outside normal school hours is a strength of residential schools and colleges.

2.1 Views of current placements

All of the parents interviewed are satisfied with their child's current placement. Most are very happy with the education, care and support given to their child, although three expressed minor criticisms.

All of the families interviewed had a child with complex and challenging needs and overall, almost all parents felt that the school meets their child's needs. Parents reported very positive benefits of residential education for their child. They had experienced a range of improvements in their child's skills, attitudes and behaviour including an increase in independence, improvement in condition (such as behaviour),

increased confidence and self-esteem, and improvement in family relationships.

The general view was summed up by one parent: '[The school] has brought her on quite a lot [...]. They have let her grow.' A few parents explained that improvements in behaviour and attention had led to greater independence. Examples were given of children being better able to access the curriculum and other activities. A few parents said their child is happier at their current school than their previous school.

Some parents said the residential education placement had turned out better than expected. For example, one parent said that 'educationally and socially the residential setting was the best decision for [my son]'.

In particular, a number of specific benefits of residential education were highlighted by parents:

- the quality of education
- personalisation of learning
- opportunities for learning outside normal school hours
- supporting independence
- the development of social skills in a supportive environment
- the availability of specialist support and medical expertise.

Parents felt that their child was progressing well in terms of their education, and several said that the school encouraged their child to achieve more than they expected would be possible. One parent said: 'He is thriving there [...]. He is doing things we never dreamed he could do.' Some of the parents felt that being in a class with others of similar ability had increased their child's confidence about his or her own abilities.

Young people and parents felt that the residential settings are helping young people to develop their interests and learning is personalised to their needs. The schools and colleges offer individual advice and guidance for what they might like to do after leaving school or college, as one parent explained: '[My son] lives with five boys and it's all about them. They [the school] work with them individually.' Parents felt that young people are being given skills appropriate to their ability, which could help them enter employment in the future.

One of the key factors in the success of the residential schools and colleges is the level of resources and expertise available, and the structured days filled with positive activities. For example, one parent said: '[My son] has a meaningful life.' Many parents felt that their child's school or college gives them a stimulating environment, for example, through after-school clubs and activities.

Parents valued the focus on the development of young people's independent living skills outside normal school hours (before school, in the evenings and at weekends). Almost all parents said residential schools and colleges are supporting their child to become more independent and preparing them for adult life.

Several parents described the marked improvement they had noticed in their child's ability to do tasks for themselves since attending their school or college, such as washing up, tidying and getting dressed. In some cases, the schools and colleges had also worked with the young people to enable them to use public transport.

Parents valued the wider education their child is receiving and recognised the role the independent living skills will have in their child's future. Although many of the parents said their child would always need some kind of support, they felt that the development of these skills is important to help them live as independently as possible after leaving school or college. This was true for most parents, and particularly so for those who recognised that they would not always be able to look after their child themselves, and felt that residential education provided a stepping stone to their child living independently in supported housing. For example, one parent said: 'We're [parents] not getting any younger – we need to have somewhere in place for [our daughter].'

In some respects, parents felt that the residential schools and colleges are helping them to understand their child better. For example, one parent said residential education helps parents to recognise that their child is becoming an adult. Parents are shown what their child can, rather than cannot, do. This encourages parents to help their child to be more independent:

A lot of people [parents] don't want to make the leap. I think a lot of people – and I'm as guilty of this as everyone else – think of their disabled young person as a child still and you have to make a leap. Going to residential college makes that leap for you. From my daughter's point of view it has been a complete success.

Parents felt that supportive staff combined with the positive influence of peers, encourages young people to take on more responsibility for themselves, as illustrated in the example below.

Practice example

The House Manager explained that when two sisters initially came to the school, dinner times 'were not a very social occasion'. However, with the support of staff, and the good example provided by the other residents, both sisters were able to do their own clearing and tidying up after meal times, and help their friends to tidy up. Their parents were very pleasantly surprised that they could now take the girls out for meals, as they were previously unable to do this.

The House Manager explained:

The improvement that we've had with them compared to when they started is unbelievable. It's mainly the physical side, so doing things for themselves, being motivated [...] things like clearing away their plates from the table. Mum and Dad were astonished! Meal times were not a good time and the family couldn't eat together, the girls would make it a nightmare apparently. But when they came to us, they were with 15 students, sitting down to eat at the same time as they do, peer pressure works wonders! As well as following example and routine, it has just been fantastic for them.

Parents and young people both highlighted that schools and colleges focus on the development of social skills and provide an opportunity to live with other people outside of their families. Making friends and creating social relationships were identified as beneficial outcomes of residential education by both parents and young people. One young person said: 'I get to talk to friends here but at home I was alone.' Another said that one of the things he liked most about his school is talking to his room-mate. One parent felt that the residential school had really helped her son in terms of providing him with a peer group, which was not possible at home.

Staff at residential settings were perceived as caring and the environment supportive. The residential units were praised by parents for providing a second home:

The way these schools specialise in making it like home out of hours – they have fun, they do great things, they really care about what the students want to do, it really is as good as being at home because he has fun. I know it's not all about having fun, but he can learn because he is happy.

The availability of onsite specialist support and medical expertise is important to parents. They valued consistent, experienced and kind staff, and the access to multi-disciplinary support such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy and medical care: 'The top thing is that she is surrounded by people who have medical knowledge and ability.'

On the whole, parents felt that their child is happy at school although a couple of parents did say their child found being away from home difficult. Some parents also said that they found it difficult having their child so far away. If suitable provision had been available locally, they would have preferred their child to be at home and attending a school in the local area. However, in every such case these parents emphasised the fact that there was not any suitable provision in their LA. For example, one parent said:

I would give anything to have my daughter living in the local area, but realistically it wouldn't work [here] she can't get the same support that the [current] school provides.

(Also see Chapter 4 for more about the placement and options process.)

Parents felt that the combination of local maintained provision and their home life could not offer their child the opportunities or skills provided by the residential settings. One parent said their son would be 'like a lost soul if he came home – I don't have what they [the school] have got'. Furthermore, some parents, and particularly those living in rural areas, felt that their child would be isolated from other young people if they returned to live at home after leaving school or college. A few parents expressed concern about what might happen to their child's progress in the future if they do not have access to the level of staff support and resources they currently receive.

In most cases, parents felt their child had a good balance between home and school life. Very few of the placements were for the whole year and, in almost all families, the child came home for holidays and over half came home at the weekend. Young people below the age of 18 were more likely to be at home at the weekend; but this was less common among the young people that attended a college.

Communication of progress and issues to parents was generally perceived to be good, although some parents would have liked better updates and handovers from their child's school when their child comes home at the weekend or for holidays.

The box below summarises young people's views about their residential school or college.

Young people's views about their school

The young people we interviewed were positive about their residential school. Six liked their placement and were happy at their school. Only one said he 'would rather be at home'.

The young people liked having nice teachers, being in a relaxed environment and making friends. Some said their behaviour had improved. One young man said: 'I haven't really had any problems at this school' and another said he preferred his residential school because 'it's smaller, I prefer the kids here and the teachers [...]. I used to get, not bullied, but I'd get annoyed at my last school'.

Although some said they did not like travelling between school and home (which took several hours in some cases), all of them were prepared to travel in order to remain at their current school.

2.2 Role of residential schools and colleges in the future of their students

Parents were asked how the residential school or college would help their child to gain some form of employment in the future. In several cases, the parents felt that the school or college would assist their child to gain supported employment or voluntary work. There were examples of young people doing work experience in their school or local community. This is seen by parents as a particularly positive aspect of residential education. For example, one parent described how his son had achieved a qualification in office skills and was

now able to do basic office tasks (such as sorting papers). His son had also helped out in the school's reception, which had been a good learning experience for him. A few parents thought that their child's job aspirations are not always realistic, but that the school or college encouraged individual interests and career aspirations as far as possible.

An issue raised by parents was that the job market is not set up to support people with complex needs. For example, one said that her daughter might be able to become a waitress (which was what her daughter wanted to do), but doubted that the workplace could give her the level of support she would need.

Some parents said that their child's needs are too complex for them to ever gain employment. However, they were hopeful that, with support and the right type of supported living environment, they would be able to live interesting and stimulating lives.

3 Why choose residential education?

As demonstrated in Chapter 2, parents and young people are happy with the provision offered by residential schools and colleges for young people with complex needs. This chapter looks at the reasons why families choose to send their child to a residential school or college.

Summary of findings

- Residential education was the preferred choice of all of the families interviewed at the time of the placement decision.
- Factors that influence parents' decisions include the ability of the school or college to meet their child's needs, the quality of education, the availability of specialist care (including the experience and qualifications of staff), the opportunities for developing independent living skills, and their child's own preference.

3.1 Why did the young person change placements?

There was a broadly equal mix in terms of the type of provision that the young people had moved from. Just over a third had moved from a mainstream school; a third had moved from a day placement at a special school; and just under a third had moved from another residential school. One young person had previously attended a pupil referral unit. Two young people had not been attending school for some time because they had been excluded from a mainstream school.

Fifteen parents said their child's move had been triggered by age; for example, when they reached the end of primary school. Many parents explained that it then became apparent that there were no mainstream or special schools in their area that could meet their child's needs.

Nine parents said their child had moved placements because the previous school or college could no longer meet their child's needs. In some cases this was due to a change in diagnosis and their statement of SEN.

In one case, the family had moved house so the child moved from one residential school to another to be nearer to home.

3.2 What did parents consider when choosing the school or college for their child?

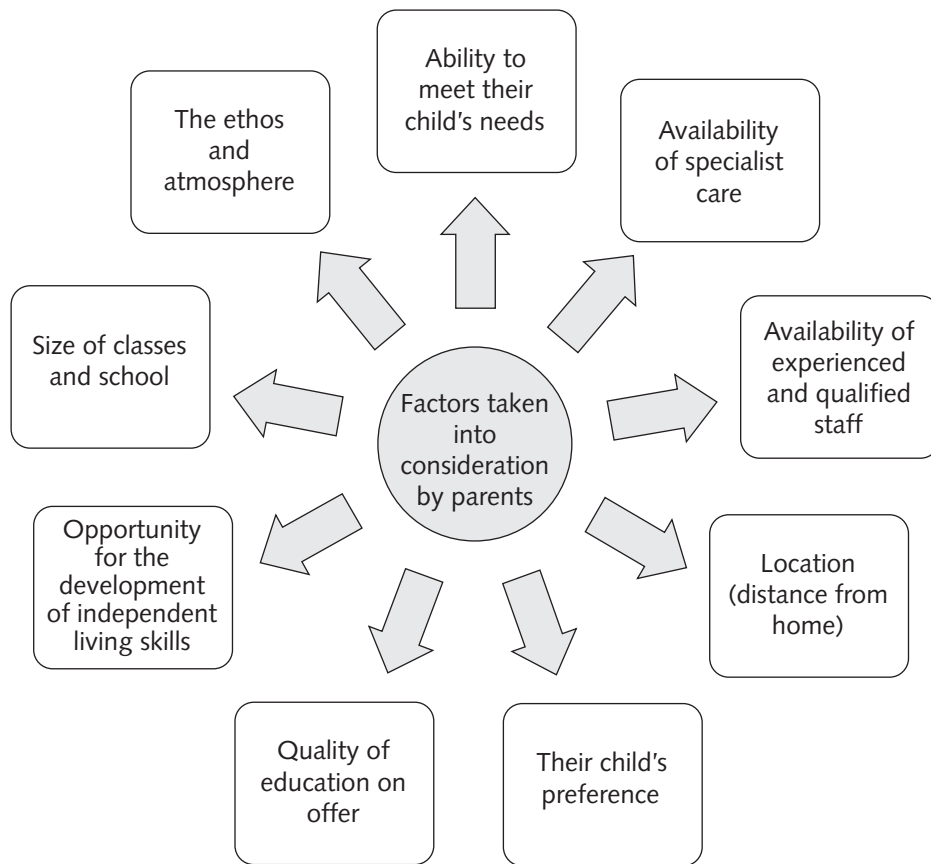
Parents considered a number of key factors when looking at options for their child's school, as illustrated in Figure 3.1. Many are the same as those considered by parents of children without SEN when looking for a school. Additional considerations for this group of parents, however, included the availability of experienced and qualified staff and the availability of specialist care, which in some cases includes the ability of the school to meet their child's medical needs.

Almost all parents said that a school or college's ability to cater for their child's needs was an important factor in the decision. This was linked to the availability of specialist care and appropriate staff. A few parents took this a step further and said it was important that the school demonstrated that they understood the child's needs and how best to give support.

School or college location was a factor for several parents, but not always one that was resolved to the parents' satisfaction. Around a third said they would have liked their child to attend a school closer to home; four out of five of the families reported a journey of an hour or more to reach their child's school (the longest journey being three and a half hours each way).

Parents also considered the views of their child when choosing a school or college. Many talked about wanting their child to be happy and to thrive at whichever school they attended. In several cases, the

Figure 3.1 Factors taken into consideration by parents when looking at suitable schools for their child with SEN



young person had visited one or more schools in advance, and some had the opportunity to stay overnight. Their child's behaviour and attitude whilst visiting the schools gave the parents an idea about their child's preference if the child was not able to verbalise their feelings due to their particular SEN. In one family, the child's view was the deciding factor between two schools, both of which were suitable in terms of meeting her needs. After visiting the schools, it was clear that the young person much preferred a different school to her parents and the LA, so they decided to place the young person in the school that she preferred.

3.3 Deciding between residential and day provision

Over a third of the parents interviewed had specifically looked for a residential placement rather than a day placement. In some of these cases, their child had already attended a residential school which had been a positive experience. A common view among these parents is that a residential placement could provide

better support for their child's complex needs than the local mainstream and special schools, and the parents could at home. For example, one parent said that in their view residential education is the only way their child can have 'a structured and busy life'. Another said sending their daughter to a residential school 'was the best thing we did [because] we couldn't do for her what others could'.

Two parents also said they wanted their child to go to a residential school or college to get used to living away from home and to learn independent living skills. A few parents mentioned that residential provision provides respite for the family and reduces the strain of caring for that child; however, only two cited this as a direct reason for seeking a residential placement instead of a day placement.

About a third of parents (all of whom had not sent their child to residential education before) said that originally they would have preferred day provision so their child could continue to live at home. A few would have preferred their child to be educated in mainstream provision, with appropriate support.

However, they recognised they had to be realistic and think about the best option for their child in terms of meeting their needs and giving them a good education. These parents felt that the support and staff expertise that young people with complex needs require is not available in local mainstream schools, as one parent explained:

I would have preferred proper support in a mainstream setting, but that wasn't going to happen. Realistically, [the current residential school] was my top choice. In a really good education system I'm still sure they

could have stayed at home, but the education system and the rural area was pushing against that.

Although not all parents had started the process in favour of residential education, by the time they made their decision, all parents said their child's current school had been their preferred choice. Indeed, several parents stated that their child's residential school or college was the only viable option that was able to adequately meet their child's educational, medical and care needs. (Also see Chapter 4 for more about the placement and options process.)

4 Experiences of the placement process

This chapter summarises families' experiences of the placement process. It also describes parents' views about the information and support they received, including the support available from their LA.

Summary of findings

- Many parents found the placement process stressful and most parents said they had to search for information themselves.
- The information and support offered by LAs was considered to be unsatisfactory by more than half of the parents, whilst a quarter had mixed views. Parents felt that a confusing system and a focus on costs is detrimental to the process.
- Parents who were satisfied with the support and information they received from their LA valued being listened to and having their views taken into account.
- Parents called for earlier diagnosis and support, and the joining up of services and funding decisions. They would have liked to have received information and support in person. There was agreement that there needs to be more local provision for children and young people with SEN.

4.1 Parents' views on the placement process

The placement and statementing process was seen as unsatisfactory by many of the parents interviewed for this research. Their comments revealed that they had experienced an adversarial and complicated process. Many felt they had been left to navigate the system alone and had to do their own research to find out the options available. Several parents had been through at least one tribunal, had written briefs to panels and had

hired independent help (such as solicitors and educational psychologists). Parents said the onus was often on them to prove that local provision was unsuitable for their child, and many reported finding this experience very stressful.

Many of the 25 parents we interviewed described the residential education process as 'a fight', and one explained:

The process is a nightmare, a lottery, and if you weren't a really assertive parent your child's education would go downhill very rapidly.

Other parents said the experience had been 'frustrating' and often required them to 'jump through hoops'. One parent described the placement process as 'absolutely hell for parents and children'. Several others said that the system was too complicated and lacked transparency. Another explained:

I'm a pushy parent [...]. I have got the services I have got because I have shot my mouth off [...]. My daughter can't speak for herself so I spoke for her.

Information and choice

The majority of parents said they did not feel well informed about the education options available for their child during the placement process. The main issue they faced was finding out about the full range of viable options available.

Almost all of the parents reported having searched for information independently, using websites and sometimes hiring independent professionals to help. Even those who said they felt well informed said this was because of their own research. One parent said: 'I orchestrated everything myself.' Another said she felt 'very isolated' when trying to find out about suitable schools. Several parents remarked that they would not have known anything if they hadn't looked it up for themselves.

A small number of parents said Parent Partnerships and Connexions are sources of information, but found them of limited help and expressed concern that these services are not impartial because of their link with LAs. Several parents would have liked to receive objective advice from professionals they had been working with and respected. However, in their experience, staff working for the LA were reluctant to provide advice, due to a combination of blame and avoiding recommending expensive options. Two parents described the issues they had encountered:

Anyone working for the LA or local health were guarded about making recommendations. I think they thought they would be held culpable if it didn't work out.

A lot of speech and language specialists and teachers are limited in what they are able to advise parents [...] because that means the local borough has to fund it, and they have got a limit. And if anybody names a school then they are told off [...] especially if it is out of area, it is frowned upon.

Parents found it helpful to speak to others who had also been through the process. This type of support was particularly valued by parents who were unsure about who could give them assistance and how to negotiate and challenge the decisions being made about their child's education. One parent described the support received from other parents as a 'life-line', and another had set up her own support group for parents with children with similar needs.

Many parents expressed concern for the families who do not understand their rights or the process, or who cannot finance a challenge to decisions made about their child's education. The lack of information at the beginning of the process is seen as a specific issue. One parent pointed out that it is hard to know where to look for something if you do not know that you need to look for it. Another said:

I think it is so sad that only the parents that understand their rights or have the ability to communicate the needs for their kids get the best places.

The parents interviewed emphasised the amount of work they had put in to the placement process themselves. There was a general view that they would

not have obtained their preferred place without a concerted effort on their part.

The young people who were interviewed differed in their opinions about the amount of choice they had about their school placement. Of the five young people who answered the question, three said that they had been able to express a preference to their parents. One said that he was told the options by his social worker but did not have any say in the final decision. Another said he was not given any choice at all – it was that school or no school.

Views on the information and support from the LA

In addition to how well informed parents felt generally, we also asked how they rated the role of the LA, specifically the support and information that the LA had provided. Parents' views were very mixed in terms of the information and support they received from the LA during the placement process. Based on the interviews, it would seem the quality of LA information and support depends on the individuals that parents have contact with at the LA. As one parent noted, it seems to be 'the personalities not the post' that are important.

Of the 25 parents interviewed, five were fairly or very satisfied; six had mixed views; and 14 were not satisfied with the information and support they received from their LA.

The parents who were satisfied said they were happy with the input from the LA because their child had ended up with their preferred school. One parent said 'the LA was very helpful and got him [my son] in there [college]'. Parents in this group felt they had been listened to. For example, one parent described the process as 'a joint effort' with the LA, reporting that the family's preferences were fully taken into account. In addition, two parents said the process was made easier by the fact that funding was already in place from the previous placement. However, it should be noted that all five satisfied parents also reported that they had done a lot of research for themselves.

The parents with mixed views mostly reported that the information they received from the LA was inadequate. Two parents explained:

They were very sympathetic [...]. They always came up with the funding at the last minute [but] in so far as actually giving us ideas of places to go, they were absolutely hopeless really.

The LA provided a list of schools, but I had to do the rest.

Many felt that parents really need to understand the system to get the placement they want for their child. One said: '[I am] probably more clued up than some parents [...]. They get walked on.' Some of these parents also described the experience as stressful and reported having argued with the LA, as another parent explained: 'You need to throw your toys out of the pram to get anything done.'

Several parents felt that once a decision had been made, LA staff were relatively supportive and sympathetic. One parent said that it was not easy to work with so many different LA staff and staff across different agencies.

Just over half of the parents who were interviewed said they were dissatisfied with the amount of information and support provided by their LA. Several parents felt that the placement process was not clear and that they had to work hard to understand the process. Parents reported receiving inaccurate information from their LA and many felt the support was unsatisfactory. Some parents reported that they did not feel listened to, and did not feel as if the LA was taking account of their preferences. One parent explained that, in their view, the LA was reluctant to listen to them or the 'independent specialists' they had turned to for an opinion on their child's needs:

The LA sent a lot of information and brochures and information about help-lines, but when it comes to the point of discussing needs they were very reluctant to listen.

4.2 Perceived barriers in the placement process

Across those interviewed, parents wanted more understanding from their LA. Many expressed concern that the government and LA are not sensitive enough to the pressures placed on the parents of children with SEN and disabilities, and that the bureaucracy and

lengthy decision-making process for funding and a placement put additional strain on parents and children. One parent described the impact of delays to the process upon families:

Why wait until the family is in breakdown before going in to help? It's like they [the LA] wait until you've got no more strength left in you before they step in and have to help in the end.

Another parent described an 18-month process of securing funding for a college placement for her daughter who required 24-hour specialist care. She said that the delayed decision about funding meant that her daughter had no transition plan in place for the next academic year. She felt that the stress of the situation had worsened her daughter's condition and despite sending a GP's letter to the LA to explain this, the family were still waiting for a verdict on their daughter's placement.

Several parents said their biggest challenge lay in obtaining what they considered to be an appropriate diagnosis of their child. This is a particular issue if a child's condition has changed or it takes a long time for a child to be diagnosed. For example, one parent explained that his daughter's condition changed while she was a teenager. Until a new diagnosis was made, it was more difficult to obtain support for her new needs or identify a suitable placement.

Two parents mentioned that the support from the LA was much better once a clear diagnosis was made because it allowed suitable provision to be identified, as one of the parents explained: 'It [obtaining a school placement] all hinged on an autistic diagnosis.' However in both these cases, obtaining a diagnosis took time, during which no specialist support was in place. In addition, some parents said that their child's multiple needs made it difficult to obtain suitable support. They explained that the lack of a single diagnosis meant that their child did not precisely fit the criteria for placements at schools which catered for specific needs. This is a particular issue for children with serious medical needs or behavioural problems in addition to their primary need, as described in the example below.

One family's experience

One mother with a son with Asperger Syndrome and emotional and behavioural difficulties reported how difficult it was to access support because his needs did not tick the right boxes: 'I was told that if he had a learning disability we would have had help years ago.'

After witnessing the young man being aggressive at home, a social worker tried to get things moving. But the funding was delayed and it took a further ten months to secure a placement which caused further strain on the family.

This parent felt that the system failed the family for many years, and was convinced that earlier support would have prevented her son now needing residential education.

A number of parents also mentioned difficulties in working with multiple services that did not share information and seemed to work entirely separately, as one commented: 'They all know their bit but nobody knows the whole system.'

Some parents also said they had been made to feel 'greedy', and as if they were asking for too much money for their child. Funding was identified as a particular problem by several parents who felt that their LA is more concerned about the cost of a placement than the quality of care for a child, as one parent explained:

Their objective was completely different to ours, it was about placing within the authority, it was a money-

based decision. You could see that by the way they would focus only on areas of [my son's] need that fitted the slot they wanted to put him in. They would minimise the other problems so that they felt he would fit the school that they wanted him to go to.

Many parents felt that some options are not offered because the focus is on how much it will cost rather than if the placement was right. One parent said: 'I was very aware that I was fighting for money and not for the best outcome for my children.' When asked about their child's educational options, one parent replied: 'Options don't come into it if there's not enough funding.'

A number of parents also commented on the lack of local provision that could meet their child's complex needs: 'There just aren't enough places – they are like gold dust.' Two parents (living in different LAs) described how, in their experience, their LA had pushed for a placement in a local mainstream school or college which was not able to meet their child's needs. Both said they wished that schools and colleges would be more realistic about their ability to provide for children and young people with complex needs. In addition, some parents felt their LA did not understand that their preference for residential education was a result of limited local provision, rather than a wish for out-of-authority provision as such, and this had been a difficult decision for them to make.

Some parents said that the theory behind the process is fine, but this is not happening in practice, as one parent said: 'I'm happy with the way the system is supposed to operate.' Another said: 'The government needs to understand that mainstream is not always best.'

5 Suggested improvements to the placement process

The research team asked parents if they had any suggestions for improving the current process for placing children and young people in residential educational settings. Their suggestions are summarised in this chapter.

Summary of recommendations

From the areas for improvement suggested by parents, a number of recommendations emerged.

Keep the focus on the young person and their needs

- Meeting a young person's needs should be the priority during the placement process rather than funding.
- Improvement of early identification and assessment could prevent the need for support later in a child's life.

Provide better information and support for parents

- LAs should provide more balanced information to parents about the placement process and their child's school/college options.
- Schools and LAs need to have staff who are trained to work with families and who understand the SEN system.
- Access to information and support from other parents and independent organisations should be facilitated.
- If personalised budgets are to work effectively, their use needs to be monitored and there needs to be adequate support in place to help parents to manage them efficiently.

Devise a simpler and more transparent system

- The placement process should be simplified and more flexible to ensure that the children and young people have access to the help they need.
- Professionals should be able to speak freely about what they think is the most appropriate placement without fear of being reprimanded by their LA for making an expensive suggestion.
- Schools and LAs should be realistic about the suitability and availability of educational placements for children and young people with SEN.

Ensure effective multi-agency working

- Services and agencies need to work together to provide information and support to families.
- Parents need to know who is responsible for decisions and who to contact.
- Multi-agency funding should be pooled to avoid unnecessary delays in the decision making process.
- Delays in funding decisions need to be addressed to allow transition plans to be put in place early.

Increase the availability of suitable provision

- Local specialist schools, agencies and services (both maintained and independent) should be retained and parents would like to see more provision for young people with complex needs.

Keep the focus on the young person and their needs

Most parents thought that a change is required in funding provision. They are unhappy with the process, including the disputes they went through to secure a place for their child to attend their preferred school or college. Several parents felt very strongly that a child's needs should be considered entirely separately from any funding issues.

Over a third of parents said earlier and better quality assessments are needed to identify children's needs and put support in place early. A number of these parents also felt that had this been done, it may have prevented the need for their child to be in residential education now. One said LAs should 'think long term and plan long term'. A number of parents also thought that investing in support for children and young people when they are young would save money in the long run:

It's crazy to say that it's because there isn't enough money, they'll spend so much more on having to house and support these people later on. It's far better to do it now and a percentage of them could end up having an independent life.

Of course it costs a lot of money, but if you deny children the education and the support they really need then you will create problems in the future.

Another parent suggested that, where possible, children with SEN should be 'flagged up' by hospital staff or educational psychologists when they are young to ensure that appropriate funding is available for them when they reach school age and adulthood.

Better information and support for parents

Several parents felt that LAs need to consider the whole family and provide a more holistic approach to supporting young people. They described how a lack of support and the stress of the placement process led to family breakdown, or very close to it. One parent said that the placement process was 'very hard work [...]. It almost finished us off as a family, it was awful'.

Parents felt that LAs should provide much more information to families about school and college options, and the entire statementing and placement process. Parents also thought that information should be more balanced, and that they should be informed of all possible sources of provision. One parent suggested having a central place for all information that parents are able to access themselves.

Almost all parents felt LAs could improve their support for parents throughout the process. Many felt that face-to-face contact is essential and one suggested that a single contact person for the family who works across all agencies and services would be useful. Another suggested that families could be provided with impartial and independent experts to help them through the process.

Parents would like more opportunities to meet and talk with other families in similar situations. One parent suggested an online database where parents could sign up to be contacted. Independent charities and voluntary groups with relevant expertise were also highlighted as useful sources of information, and one parent felt they could be utilised more.

Two parents spoke specifically about the proposed personal budgets for parents set out in the Green Paper (DfE, 2011). They thought this would create additional pressure and responsibility for parents of children and young people with SEN. One parent felt it would be a good step, but thought that many parents would need support and worried that 'the extra admin [will] put an enormous burden on parents'. The other parent was happy that it would 'direct funding where it is needed', but was concerned that personalised budgets put a greater onus on parents to do things for themselves, and thought that the process would need careful monitoring.

Devise a simpler and more transparent system

Many parents would like a simpler and more transparent placement process. Parents felt that it needed to be more consistent and fair. Many said it needs to be more flexible, and to consider the whole person rather than trying to fit them into a box on a

form. Several parents were very passionate about their perception that professionals cannot always say what they truly think because the LA cannot afford the cost of the most appropriate placement, whether that is residential or not.

Parents also thought that LAs should be realistic and transparent about the educational options that are available for their child and should inform them of out-of-authority and residential placements as well as local mainstream ones. One parent said that LAs need to think about 'what is best for the child, not just what is available in the borough'. They also thought that schools should be realistic about whether or not they could meet the needs of children with SEN and disabilities, as one parent explained:

You have to battle and argue [...]. They [staff at the local mainstream college] know very well right from the beginning that they can't cope with [my son's needs] and they do use the word 'cope', and it's not – it's about educating, not 'coping' with your child. I don't want him to go somewhere where he is 'coped' with.

Ensure effective multi-agency working

Parents said they would like to see agencies working more closely together and communicating better with parents. There were instances where parents felt that agencies 'passed the buck' and avoided taking responsibility for decisions, which led to lengthy delays. This was particularly the case regarding funding decisions, and many parents reported finding this experience very stressful.

Parents reported experiencing most decision-making delays when their child first entered residential education or moved from children's to adult's services. One parent suggested that putting funding all 'under one umbrella' could speed things up. Another thought that the joined-up working of agencies and services

would improve annual reviews which should, in theory, already be multi-disciplinary but were often missing representatives from one of the services.

Parents also reported receiving different information from different agencies and many complained of a lack of coordination. Parents thought it should be clearer where responsibilities lie between different agencies and services, and who the point of contact is for parents. A few parents also noted the need for expert staff (particularly in social care) who understand the system and are trained to work with families. One parent suggested teachers should be given more training about children with SEN and the statementing process. Another said that, in theory, he liked the idea of the Education Health and Care Plan set out in the Green Paper (DfE, 2011), but thought it would be difficult in practice to get all relevant professionals in the same place at the same time.

Several parents felt that the transition process needed to start earlier in the school year to ensure young people have an adequate transition plan in place. The process also needs to be explained to parents well in advance. Parents felt that the main barrier to this is the current delay in decision making regarding funding and placement. One parent suggested that this could be resolved by moving funding reviews to earlier in the school year (currently they take place in July/August).

Increase the availability of suitable provision

Many parents expressed concern that there is not enough specialist provision for children with complex needs, including residential education options. They felt there should be more places available around the country. Most parents, whose children were placed in a different LA, wished their child could be placed closer to home. One parent suggested having more schools and colleges that are charitable trusts, and another was keen to ensure that specialist schools and services are safeguarded from closure.

6 Summary and conclusions

Parents of young people with SEN attending residential schools and colleges are satisfied with the provision in terms of schools and colleges meeting their child's needs. Almost all of the young people interviewed are happy at residential school and particularly liked being around other young people and kind teachers. The provision is perceived to be personalised to individual interests and needs.

The parents valued how residential schools and colleges are providing holistic care for young people with complex needs, and addressing education, care and medical needs in the same location. Preparing young people for adulthood and giving them independent living skills was identified as a particular strength of residential schools due to the opportunities afforded by 24-hour support.

Although residential education is seen as a valuable option for some young people with complex needs, the effort of securing funding and a place can be stressful for families. Parents identified a number of issues in the statementing and placement process, including the process taking too long, the difficulties of working with multiple services and agencies, and a lack of objective information and support. Parents also felt there is not enough local provision for young people with complex needs, and this was supported by the frequency of out-of-authority placements amongst the families we interviewed.

The SEN and disability Green Paper (DfE, 2011) proposes that in the future parents will have 'a real choice of school' as long as the choice meets the needs of the child, is not incompatible with the education of other children or is an inefficient use of resources. In this research, the parents and young people valued being able to express a preference (although they did not always feel that it was taken into account). However, persuading an LA of the suitability of their preferred school or college and securing funding often required families to be persistent and resourceful. The implication is that any shifting of responsibility and work onto parents needs to be done with caution so as not to overburden families who are already dealing with the complex needs of their child.

Families would like to have objective support and information throughout the process. Most parents had to look for their own information and stressed the importance they placed on doing this. They described the information from the LA as incomplete and, in some cases, inaccurate. Some expressed concern for those parents who do not have the ability or resources to navigate the system. All parents with children with complex needs should be given support and balanced information, particularly if there is a move to give more control and responsibility to parents, as proposed in the Green Paper (DfE, 2011).

Recent research (White *et al.*, 2010) has shown that LAs themselves recognise that parents are given advice and information of varying quality by SEN teams and that work was being done to try and improve the information provided. The research reported here suggests that getting good information and advice is still an issue for some families.

The parents we spoke to were passionate about securing the best education for their child, and their need for support and advice from professionals with experience. Parents may be experts on their own child; however, most do not have the professional experience or knowledge of how the education, care and medical systems work. Many said they would value being guided through the process. The trained key worker support proposed in the Green Paper (DfE, 2011) may be helpful, however, the underlying concerns parents have about independence could remain if key workers are not able to give balanced and impartial advice.

Although the funding for places for young people with complex SEN or disability is likely to continue to be inextricably linked to the decision about where a young person is placed, some effort may be needed to try and reconcile the perceived differences in the priorities of parents and LAs during the placement process. LAs need to demonstrate to parents that securing the most appropriate education and care is important to them too, even if (as many of the parents interviewed thought) funding is a key issue for LAs.

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Appendix: Summary of the LA information about their approaches to special educational needs/learning difficulties and disabilities residential education provision

Based on information received from five LAs (see section 1.3).

- All provided some provision for SEN pupils. Typically, this consisted of special schools or resourced bases at mainstream schools.
- Two of the five LAs had maintained residential education options in their authority (only one of these was a long-term residential setting).
- All LAs had young people with SEN placed in residential out-of-authority placements.
- Three LAs felt that there was not enough choice for young people with challenging behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. One thought there should be provision for young people with mental health problems.
- Three LAs had a placement policy; one was developing it; and one did not answer the question.
- When making placements into residential education, all LAs said they considered the family and young people's preference, and the education and care needs; three said they considered the location of the school; and two said they considered resources and cost-effectiveness.

Recently published reports

The Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme is carried out by the NFER. The research projects cover topics and perspectives that are of special interest to local authorities. All the reports are published and disseminated by the NFER, with separate executive summaries. The summaries, and more information about this series, are available free of charge at www.nfer.ac.uk/research/local-government-association/



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Safeguarding children and young people is a central concern for a range of agencies, in particular CYPS, the police and the health service. This case-study report covers the MASH model, its outcomes and impacts, and future developments. A companion report examines the hub's value for money.

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The 2011 DfE Green Paper on special educational needs and disability seeks to improve the support provided by the current education, health and social care systems for children and young people with additional needs. Residential education is an important part of this system, particularly for children and young people with complex needs.

This report explores families' experiences of residential education for young people with special educational needs or a disability, and their views on the placement process. The report covers:

- Views on residential education
- Why families choose residential education
- Experiences of the placement process
- Suggested improvements to the placement process
- Summary and conclusions