



executive summary

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

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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.



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