

A Survey Report on Transition Arrangements from Special Schools and Mainstream Learning Support Centres to Post-School Provision



2014

A SURVEY REPORT ON TRANSITION ARRANGEMENTS FROM SPECIAL SCHOOLS AND MAINSTREAM LEARNING SUPPORT CENTRES TO POST-SCHOOL PROVISION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, on the evaluation of the effectiveness of the arrangements for transition from special schools and mainstream learning support centres to post-school provision, was commissioned by the Department of Education (DE). The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carried out the evaluation in January and February 2014. The report focuses on how well the current transition processes are working and makes recommendations for improvement. The evidence base for this report includes the responses to questionnaires sent to all special schools with post-primary provision and a small sample of mainstream schools with learning support centres, seeking their views on the transition process. Parents of children in these schools received a questionnaire and a discussion was held with a group of parents to get their personal accounts of the experience of transition. In addition, visits were made to a sample of special schools and learning support centres.

The report highlights the good practices which ensure the smooth and effective transition for the majority of the pupils and, in contrast, the poor options and choices for those pupils at post-19 stage, for whom health and social services have responsibility.

THE OVERALL FINDING

- The majority of parents are content with the current transition arrangements and the efforts of schools to ensure that post-school placement is secured at an early stage and is appropriate.
- A small minority of parents of pupils with complex needs are concerned about the lack of post-school provision for their children transferring to adult health and social services provision; the impact on these parents and their children is significant.
- Schools maintain a well-organised careers curriculum and programme of support for almost all of the pupils moving to further education (FE) and training and pupils are benefiting from improved provision across the FE sector.
- Schools are concerned about the need for additional staffing support to provide more effective independent travel-training for pupils capable of making their way to FE colleges and training centres.
- While there is variation between rural and urban areas in terms of accessible provision and support from voluntary agencies, all schools express strongly their constant frustration in securing adult services places and in the variable nature of the quality of these placements.

In summary, ETI finds that the transition programme has improved. Examples of effective collaborative working are evident. However, the transition processes for schools and for some parents of a small minority of pupils transferring to health provision are consistently hampered by a lack of appropriate post-school provision and commitment to working more purposefully to address the deficiencies which this report, and others previously, have sought to highlight in the interests of parents and pupils alike.

CONCLUSION

This report makes a number of recommendations and concludes, most importantly, the need for a comprehensive review by DE and DHSSPS of the transition arrangements for a minority of the most vulnerable pupils in order to help restore the confidence of parents and schools and improve the provision which these pupils deserve and are entitled to. It will be for DHSSPS to address the quality and availability of post-19 provision for these pupils.

Quantitative terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

Performance levels

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) use the following performance levels in reports:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Department of Education (DE) commissioned the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to carry out an evaluation of the transition arrangements in special schools and learning support centres. Since 2007, ETI has focussed attention on transition from special schools to post-16 provision and post-19 provision and has previously identified areas for improvement. Transition planning from special school provision to post-school provision is also frequently raised as a matter of concern by various stakeholders and was the subject of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) report - "Review of Transitions to Adult Services for Young People with Learning Disabilities", in September 2012. In addition, the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and the Action Plans from the Bamford Review¹ identified a need for further work to be carried out to improve transitions planning.

1.2 This evaluation, based on an inspection activity undertaken in January/February 2014, provides an evaluation of current transition arrangements across all special schools and a sample of mainstream schools providing for pupils with statements of need. The report considers the quality of current arrangements for transition planning to determine whether they are meeting the needs of the young people and to evaluate the scope and effectiveness of collaboration between those involved in the transition process, including families and the statutory and voluntary agencies. It highlights the main strengths and areas for development in transition arrangements and concludes with recommendations for policy-makers.

2. Methodology

2.1 All special schools with post-primary provision and a small sample of mainstream schools with learning support centres were sent a questionnaire asking for their views on the transition process. In addition, parents of children in these schools received a questionnaire and ETI met with a group of parents to gain first-hand accounts of their experiences. Visits were also made to a sample of schools to discuss with staff the issues relating to planning and provision for young school leavers and to observe the transition practices. The inspection team collated and analysed the evidence and their findings to form the basis of this report.

3. Overall Findings

3.1 The schools maintain a well-organised transition process which works for the majority of the pupils who are moving to Further Education (FE) and training. Key staff are highly committed to working towards an effective placement for pupils and do so from when the pupils reach 14 years of age. The schools continually refine and develop provision and there is clear evidence of rich and varied experiences, including a full range of bespoke and tailored options across the careers curriculum. However, there are ongoing serious concerns raised by parents, schools and the community regarding the need for significant improvement for a small minority of pupils at post-19, for whom health and social services have responsibility.

¹ The Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning disability (Date?).....

3.2 Developments within Area Learning Communities and through funding under the Entitlement Framework have resulted in improved accreditation opportunities in the special schools and more suitable pathways to a greater range of FE and training opportunities for pupils leaving special schools and learning support centres. In addition, those pupils leaving special schools for moderate learning difficulties benefit greatly from access to extended provision at post-16.

3.3 There is a need for better communication with parents, at an earlier stage, about post-19 provision for those young people with complex needs, particularly those for whom FE is not an option and in areas where health provision is in short supply. The need for dedicated support and co-operation between health and education transition workers, to map out options and choices that are clear and realistic from the age of 14 years, should be given higher priority. A comprehensive review of what transition should involve for these pupils is urgently required to help restore the confidence of parents and schools.

3.4 School leavers' programmes benefit greatly from support by voluntary agencies, such as Barnardos, Orchardville, and Mencap, who provide notable opportunities for young people. The school staff value having these located locally and easily accessible. Unfortunately, while these are often more easily accessed in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, they are much more restricted in rural locations. In rural areas, with limited Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) provision, this means that the young people's opportunities are additionally disadvantaged.

3.5 A range of areas for improvement were highlighted by teachers, parents and pupils. These were mostly based around supporting young people's independence, social and life-skills, travel-training, support, advice and mentoring, before and during college placement, during work opportunities or on work experience.

4. Findings from the parental questionnaires

4.1 Analysis of parental questionnaires indicates that from 180 parental returns, 140 were generally content with the transition process although they identified a range of areas for improvement based around supporting independence, travel-training, support and advice before and during college placement, work opportunities or experience. Eight parents were unequivocally positive about how their children were supported to transfer from school to post-school provision.

4.2 Thirty-two returns outlined a very negative experience. Of these negative responses, almost all referred to issues with transition to adult services for pupils with profound learning difficulties often concerning the lack of provision entirely but also concerned with last minute decisions, poor communication about options or dissatisfaction with pupils being placed in an environment with elderly adults. The frustration felt by parents of young people for whom FE or training is not an option is very evident and reflects the unsuitable nature, as they see it, of transition to Adult Day/Education Centres.

4.3 In the parents' view, the professional development issues for staff in adult centres around medical care and treatment of pupils with severe and complex needs often hinders or slows down placements for young people. There is often disappointment for those parents living in geographical locations where post-19 options are part-time or temporary in nature (particular concern was expressed by parents in the Southern Trust area) and this has significant impact on family life including employment (i.e. a number of parents felt their only option was to give up their jobs). There is confusion and frustration felt by parents in this predicament and they report family life and relationships are affected by anxiety and worry. The impact of the transition planning process on the emotional wellbeing of those parents who see no viable options for their young people is immense. The breakup of routine and

structure, caused by a lack of full-time placements, disrupts family life and negatively affects the young people. These parents commented that other young people are presumed to have a right to a whole range of pathways including further and higher education which meet their particular needs, while their children are given a very limited choice, if any.

4.4 The ETI's meeting with parents highlighted that for pupils whose choice is confined to transition from special schools to post-19 provision in adult centres provided by health services, the need for improvement is glaring. The process continues to be a time of great anxiety and distress for too many parents and families. There is a need for better communication with parents at an earlier stage about post-19 provision for young people when FE is not an option. The need for dedicated support, mapping out options and choices that are clear and realistic from the age of 14 years, should be given higher priority by all concerned.

4.5 A comprehensive review, of what transition should involve for these pupils, is urgently required to help restore the confidence of parents and schools.

5. Findings from school visits

5.1 The ETI also visited a small sample of six special and two mainstream schools in order to gain the views of senior management, teachers, support staff and pupils. The schools for pupils with severe learning difficulties visited, mirrored the concern shown by parents about the availability and suitability of post-school provision for those young people with complex learning difficulties and associated needs. This remains a major area for improvement.

5.2 The evidence indicates that schools maintain a well organised transition process which works for almost all of the pupils who are moving to FE and training. Key staff are highly committed to working towards effective placements/destinations for young people and do so from when they reach 14 years of age. The schools continually refine and develop the curriculum to make it practical and relevant and ensure, where appropriate, that accreditation pathways are individually planned. There is clear evidence of rich and varied experiences, including a full range of bespoke and tailored options across the careers curriculum. In all cases, the schools acknowledge the support they have gained from participating in Area Learning Communities and through funding under the Entitlement Framework. Schools also value the support from the Department for Employment and Learning careers service and, in particular, from those officers with specific background and training in special needs.

5.3 School leaver programmes benefit greatly from support by voluntary agencies and staff value having these services located locally and accessible. The services are often more easily accessed in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, with greater restrictions in the more rural locations. Organisations like Barnardos, Orchardville, and Mencap are providing notable opportunities for young people.

5.4 However, some common issues remain within this improving picture. These include the need for additional support, mentoring and coaching to enable pupils to develop social and life skills in order to take best advantage of FE and training. Schools are particularly concerned with the need to provide independent travel-training for those pupils capable of making their own way to education or training providers. This action currently requires high levels of staffing often at the expense of other important priorities in school. Transport costs are a matter of concern for parents. Nevertheless, provision for young people entering FE

with learning difficulties and disabilities is improving with recent inspections by ETI indicating overall performance levels as very good in Belfast Metropolitan College, Southern Regional College and South West College. Young people are benefiting from discrete courses appropriate to moderate and severe learning difficulties and there are effective support mechanisms in place to support their learning, social and physical needs.

5.5 Of particular note are the improvements as a result of the extension to post-16 education in special schools for young people with moderate learning difficulties. There is clear evidence of significant improvement in the transition process for these young people. These schools appreciate and have taken good advantage of the additional time to source training or FE opportunities for their pupils across a wider range of providers and to offer a more bespoke suite of accredited courses to suit individual needs. In addition, the special schools generally have been able to benefit from working together, for example in the greater Belfast area, to negotiate more choice of FE courses and more appropriate opportunities for accreditation. Since the last ETI report (2005), there are many more accredited courses available and schools report that funding from the Entitlement Framework has given them significant flexibility to broaden the range of options purchased from FE and training to the benefit of their pupils. It is sensible to share experiences across the special school system so that schools can learn from one another.

5.6 The transition officers employed by the Education and Library Boards continue to develop their roles and are valued when they have an active and supportive involvement with schools and young people. A key element of their impact is the development of joint working with the transitions officers from health. In a minority of schools, principals are concerned that the role is overly bureaucratic and less practical or supportive of the individual needs of the young people, their parents and families. In these schools, families do not consistently receive appropriate information from the transition service about the options and support available to them on leaving school. The families report the need for more effective joint-working between the health and education transition staff.

6. Recommendations

6.1 The highest priority recommendation is the need for a comprehensive review by DE and DHSSPS of the transition arrangements for a minority of the most vulnerable pupils in order to help restore the confidence of parents and schools and improve the provision which these pupils deserve and are entitled to. It will be for DHSSPS to address the quality and availability of post-19 provision for these pupils.

6.2 The schools have identified a number of practical ways in which their ongoing work with the majority of other young people transitioning to post-school provision can be improved. The following recommendations are ETI's endorsement of their views. These include the need:

- for further collaboration across the special schools and learning support centres to share the good practice developed to date in transition programmes, for example, to share the good practice in the Belfast clustering of special schools where shared working is effective;
- to consolidate, review, extend and evaluate progress made in post-16 provision for pupils with moderate learning difficulties;
- to develop further systems for mentoring, coaching and supporting pupils to develop the necessary social and life-skills to avail of provision post-school, whatever the location;

- for resources to develop independent travel-training, particularly in rural areas and outlying urban locations; and
- to engage further with those voluntary agencies not represented outside of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, in order to influence them to extend to those rural areas where provision is limited.

The DE needs to consider, as a priority, the resourcing of provision for the development of independence in travel, life and social skills.

7. Conclusion

7.1 This report makes a number of recommendations and concludes, most importantly, the need for a comprehensive review by DE and DHSSPS of the transition arrangements for a minority of the most vulnerable pupils in order to help restore the confidence of parents and schools and improve the provision which these pupils deserve and are entitled to. It will be for DHSSPS to address the quality and availability of post-19 provision for these pupils.

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