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Disability Research Unit, University of Leeds

Project News

Whatever Next?

YOUNG DISABLED PEOPLE LEAVING CARE

We are now two months into the fieldwork for this project. We have been concentrating on meeting a variety of 'looked after' young disabled people, so that we can see how well their experiences fit the policy framework of leaving care services. We aim to work individually with 30 young people between the ages of 14 and 25 (although we have identified many more in our mapping exercise).

We have also been working hard on our review of existing research and literature on these issues. We hope to finish an article for publication very soon from this work.

Finally, we have been keen to build up our links with practitioners and policy makers, so that we can find ways of promoting the voices and experiences of young disabled people within current policy debates.

What do you think...?

We would like to include more views and examples in our newsletters, from young disabled people and those involved in leaving care issues. If you have experiences or examples that you would like to share, please let us know.

In particular, we are keen to know what you think about government plans to exclude those who have used only 'respite care', health or educational placements from the definition of care leavers. Clearly there are advantages and disadvantages to this move:

- Is it a good idea?
- When does a part-time placement become living away from home?
- Do you have examples where 'respite care' is actually much more than this? (e.g. nearly full-time)

Parents and friends are important

Our initial work emphasises just how important parents and friends are. For example...

Parents and foster parents are often the main advocates for young people who want to go to college, rather than going to a day centre. Young people in long term family placements seem to have a better chance of going on to college. Those who rely more heavily on service providers lack the same strength of advocacy on their behalf. However, it's important to remember that some parents clearly don't encourage children to become independent either.

Young disabled people's friendship circles are often defined by the services they use (much more so than for non-disabled young people). Special friends can be important advocates, interpreters and advisers. This means that, when they leave children's services, they can lose their most important social contacts too. Our research suggests that even people who use only respite care are affected in this way. Service providers may fail to recognise this responsibility during transition planning.

Choice and Control

Young disabled adults often experience a lack of choice and control over their lives. For example, they are rarely given any real control over money, or real choice about the services they use.

Many young disabled people need considerable time and support to think about transitional planning. This is not always forthcoming and important decisions can be made very quickly, without adequate thought and discussion.

Many young disabled people would like to be more independent but don't know how to achieve this. Adults often have low expectations of what can be achieved.

How long is a piece of string...?

When does a 'series of short term placements' become an experience of living away from home? This seems to be an increasingly important question for young disabled people, given the preoccupations of Quality Protects. Young disabled people using 'respite care' or 'shared care' schemes may be accommodated five, six or seven nights a week in one, two or more places. When services become a big part of someone's life, the transition from childhood to adulthood is very like leaving care, even though it may not be seen as such.

What the politicians say...

House of Lords, 10 February 2000

Lord Clement-Jones

'There are approximately 360,000 disabled children living in the UK of whom approaching 47,000 live away from home. Local authority statistics for 1998 also indicate that up to a quarter of the looked-after population are disabled children and young people. A significant number of young people would not be eligible to receive services under the Bill as it stands at present.

These disabled and young people are placed in residential schools either on full-time placements or receive Social Services Department respite or health authority care for periods during school holidays, but are not officially looked after. They will spend most of their childhood living away from their families and are unlikely to return to live with their families when they finish their education.

The current transition planning requirements address the transfer from education and children's services to adult services, but there is no requirement for these young people to have an adviser or advocate, and decisions about their future are often made without reference to their wishes and feelings. Frequently, assumptions are made about their abilities and they are not given the opportunity to consider independent living or access to mainstream education and employment services. This is a group of marginalised and excluded young people who are denied rights available to others.

We would argue that this group also require intensive support and guidance as young adults through the transition period and that they are to all intents and purposes estranged from their families in the same way as young people leaving the looked-after system. Young disabled people may easily fall through the net of current transition services. Lack of choices in planning for adulthood can result in failure to achieve any satisfactory transition at all.

Approximately 25 per cent of the disabled people who are formally looked after also need to be considered in the provisions of the Bill. '

Lord Hunt of Kings Heath:

'We must make a distinction between those defined as being looked after and those who are not...The issue then arises where young people have not been brought within the care system in the first place and we do not think it will be helpful to take responsibility for them away from their families when they reach a certain age and give it to local authorities.'