

Disabled children at residential school

Most disabled children who live away from home go to residential school. The Children Act 1989 and the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs set out the duties and regulations that local authorities should follow in making decisions about residential school placements for disabled children. Research into how education and social services departments in 21 local authorities carried out these duties found that:

- f** The likelihood of a disabled child being sent to residential school varies greatly throughout the country.
- f** Inability to meet a child's educational needs locally and pressure on families were the two main reasons given for a disabled child going to residential school.
- f** Whilst the joint funding of placements between education and social services departments has become more common, there are wide variations between authorities in the proportion of placements that are joint funded.
- f** In the majority of authorities, placements funded solely by the education department attracted little or no attention from social services departments. Most education departments were not aware of their legal duties to notify social services about disabled children going to residential school.
- f** There was a lack of clarity about social services departments' duties towards disabled children at residential school.
- f** Education departments rarely seek the views of disabled children about how best to meet their needs. Social services departments were more likely to consult with children but they did not always check to see that this was done.
- f** There was very little guidance for parents about the practical help they could expect in order to keep contact with their child. It was often left to the discretion of individual social workers to decide how much help to give.

Introduction

The decision to send a disabled child to residential school can have far-reaching effects. A child might be at a school which is a very long way from home or for as long as 48-52 weeks a year. Keeping in touch with home is difficult. Legislation says the views of disabled children should be included in the decision-making process and that education and social services departments should work together in the best interests of the child. The research examined the way that 21 local authorities were making decisions about disabled children going to residential schools.

How many children go to residential schools?

There was wide variation in patterns of residential placement. For example, in one inner London authority there were 8 disabled children per 100 pupils with a statement of special educational needs placed at residential school by the education authority; in a North East England metropolitan authority the equivalent figure was 0.2 per 100.

Sixty-nine per cent of disabled children at residential schools in the study were boys. Most children were of secondary school age though a significant minority (about 13 per cent) were of primary school age. The four largest groups of children and young people at residential school were those with severe learning difficulties, autism, a physical impairment or a hearing impairment. Children whose primary 'special educational need' was emotional and behavioural difficulties were not included in this study.

Why do disabled children go to residential school?

Two main reasons were given for why residential placements were necessary: the inability to meet educational needs locally and overwhelming pressure within families. There were different approaches and views between, and sometimes within, authorities. Some authorities felt that a Deaf child would have to go to residential school to get access to signing provision, while others made appropriate provision within local schools. Some education authorities felt that nearly all educational needs could be met locally while others said that some children's needs could only be met in a residential setting.

Amongst both education and social services officers, the commonest reason given for a residential placement lay in the effect of a child's impairment on the family and therefore came under the heading of

'social reasons'. Some social services departments said that parents felt residential school was 'more acceptable' than other potential sources of support. They could tell friends or neighbours that their child was at boarding school rather than use respite or shared care services organised by social services which might be seen as more stigmatising by the family.

Funding placements

Most authorities reported that joint funding between education and social services was now the norm with a marked decrease in placements funded solely by the education department. While a minority of authorities were working towards pooled budgets between social services and education, most recognised the 'trading' that went on at meetings which decided how placements would be funded. Education departments wanted to resist funding placements where 'care' reasons dominated and social services departments were reluctant to get involved if the issue was 'purely' educational. Discussions at panel meetings were dominated by funding rather than the merits of a residential placement. Examples of panels being used to explore local alternatives to residential school were rare.

The role of health authorities in decision-making and contributing to funding was under-developed. Health authorities were becoming more involved in tri-partite panels but the number of placements they funded was low.

Working together

Relationships between education and social services departments varied considerably. A number of authorities talked about good working practices, shared values and the benefit of joint panels. Generally respondents were unable to identify the written documents or policies that governed joint working. The existence of joint panels or joint policy statements did not necessarily lead to good working relationships between front line staff in day-to-day work with children and parents. On the other hand, in some authorities with few written policies or formal procedures, good inter-personal relationships or informal mechanisms resulted in what was considered to be close and effective working.

Sharing information between education and social services departments

In most authorities, placements which were funded solely by education had very little involvement from social services. Yet there are two relevant statutory

duties here. The Code of Practice says that an education department should always inform social services if a child is going to be educated at residential schools so that social services can ensure that the underlying issue is not lack of help or support in the local community. The Children Act says that where a child is accommodated by an education or health authority for three months or more, the authority should inform the social services department which should then check that the child's welfare is being promoted and safeguarded.

Only two education authorities reported that formal notifications (as required under the Code of Practice) were made to a nominated social services officer when the possibility of a residential placement was under discussion. Most education departments said they thought social services would become aware of children who were funded solely by education either through their involvement in the multi-agency panel or through being sent information about the statementing process.

Most social services officers said this sharing of information happened more or less by default rather than as a conscious fulfilment of a statutory duty. Very few of the education officers interviewed knew of their obligation under the Children Act to inform social services if a child was away from home for more than three months. Most felt that social services departments would know about these children anyway because such placements would be very likely to be joint funded. In practice, this is not necessarily true, as was illustrated by reports from some social services officers that they had "discovered" children who had spent some years in 48-52 week placements.

The welfare of disabled children at residential school

Most education departments adopted a minimalist approach to ensuring the welfare of children at residential schools. Where a child was joint-funded it was presumed that social services were doing the necessary work in this area.

Annual reviews

The education department's involvement in the child's statutory annual education review was very variable. Reviews were organised and co-ordinated by the school. Social services were normally only invited if they were involved with the family. In many instances, education department staff did not routinely attend the review; some cited staff shortages and the distance to travel as prohibiting factors.

Respondents indicated that the quality of reviews varied considerably between schools.

Legal status of disabled children in residential schools

There was a lack of clarity amongst respondents about the legal status of disabled children at residential school. Most social services departments said that they treated such children as "looked after" and "accommodated" under the Children Act. A range of statutory duties are owed to a "looked after" child but most social services departments reported difficulties in carrying out six monthly reviews of joint funded placements and admitted that they did not always manage to fulfil their legal responsibilities. Children were usually allocated social workers but only one department reported the full implementation of looked after children procedures for disabled children at residential school. Four social services departments said that the children they funded at residential school were not "looked after".

Keeping in touch with parents and family

Some disabled children are at schools which are very long distances from where their families live. It can be difficult and expensive to maintain regular contact. Education departments tended to have written transport policies covering children's trips to and from school at the beginning and end of terms and half-terms. Some authorities funded additional travel for parents either to school or perhaps to an annual review. Social services departments generally recognised the duty they had to help parents keep in touch with children. However, they were very unlikely to have any written policies or procedures or written information for parents and assistance was almost entirely discretionary. Assistance was sometimes discussed at review meetings but decisions were usually based on individual negotiations between social workers and parents.

Getting the child's view

The Code of Practice says that education departments should get the views of children on how their needs should be met. Most education departments were poor at seeking a child's view when a decision about residential school was being made. Indeed in two cases, education officers stated (incorrectly) that the Code expressly ruled out their seeking children's views.

Education departments varied with regard to the inclusion of children at reviews. Schools organised reviews and there was often not much an education

department could do to make sure that a child's views were collected before the review meeting. There was a fairly passive acceptance that reviews would be a difficult, if not an impossible, arena for most children to participate in.

Social services departments were better at consulting children but comments indicated that certain children were routinely left out. Statements like "we ask the ones that can communicate" were very common, and remarks about some children's "inability" to communicate prevailed. Many respondents acknowledged that they could do better in this area, whilst others seemed undisturbed when describing their own, arguably poor, practice. Those authorities that had undertaken pilot or development projects on including children's views reported that they found out things about children's feelings that they had not known before.

Conclusion

Most respondents were committed to working co-operatively with colleagues in other departments for the welfare of the children concerned. But the ability to work effectively together could be undermined by the inevitable pressures on individual department budgets. There was a lack of understanding of key statutory provisions and duties, especially the duty of education departments to let social services departments know about disabled children going to residential school (irrespective of whether or not the placement was jointly funded by the social services department). The nature of the relationship between the child and the placing authority once the child was at school seemed fairly random, depending on who funded the placement, the willingness of schools to organise good quality reviews, the ability of education staff to go, the availability of allocated social workers to maintain relationships with children and young people who might be a great distance from home and the readiness to offer practical support to families to sustain contact.

About the study

The research was carried out by David Abbott with Linda Ward at the Norah Fry Research Centre, University of Bristol, and Jenny Morris, an independent researcher. The researchers spent time in the education and social service departments of 21 local authorities selected according to a range of criteria. The majority of the people interviewed were

senior managers, many of whom sat on review and resource allocation panels. In the second part of this project decision-making in four case study areas will be looked at in greater detail and the experiences of 40 disabled children and young people currently at residential school will be explored. The project is guided by a reference group of disabled young people and an advisory group of professionals and parents.

How to get further information

A full report of the research, **Disabled children and residential schools: A survey of local authority policy and practice** by David Abbott, Jenny Morris and Linda Ward, is published by the Norah Fry Research Centre. It is available from the Norah Fry Research Centre, University of Bristol, 3 Priors Road, Bristol BS8 1TX, Tel: 0117 923 8137, Fax: 0117 946 6553.

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