

Transition partnerships and protocols - do they help planning transition for young people?

Axel Kaehne, Cardiff University and Mary Clare O'Connell, University of Wales Newport conducted a study to ascertain whether or not local authorities in Wales actually had protocols in place and how they may have assisted in co-operating on a multi-agency level. This is what they found.

Leaving school can be disruptive for many young people with learning disabilities. Schools often offer young people a very protective environment with clear routines which increase their confidence in social situations. Leaving school can therefore be a formidable challenge for many young people. Often transition

from school means that young people encounter new peer groups, challenging social contexts and uncertainties. This may contribute positively to their sense of autonomy and independence once they have managed to come to terms with the changes. Yet the initial time of transition can be fraught with

difficulties and problems. Policy in England and Wales has identified transition as a major challenge for social and health services and good collaboration between services is seen as key to adequately supporting young people with learning disabilities in these difficult times.



Multi-agency work in transition

Part of the problem for transition has always been that many different services, ranging from social and health care to career services, housing and employment, are potentially involved in organising transition for young people with learning disabilities. Good co-ordination between all services is part and parcel of creating effective and user centred transition support for all young people (Kaehne and Beyer, 2009). Central and regional government has recognised that services need to do better at collaborating with each other to plan the transitions for young people with learning disabilities.

One way of improving inter-agency collaboration is to agree protocols which specify clearly the tasks and duties of all organisations involved in planning transitions for young people when they leave school. All learning disabilities services in Wales have been asked to develop robust partnerships between all relevant agencies and parents of young people to create good planning routes and planning practices during transition.

Why protocols?

Protocols on transition planning has often been seen as a critical factor in developing smooth transition support services. Our study examined whether or not local authorities in Wales actually had protocols in place and how they may have assisted in co-operating on a multi-agency level. In a way then and with some justification, protocols are often

seen as geared towards professionals only, with parents and young people of learning disabilities simply as the recipients of multi-agency services. However those who organise multi-agency work in transition may see protocols as a chance to involve parents and young people in the planning of transition on an equal footing with statutory agencies. This would reflect the principles of rights, autonomy and independence that have been articulated consistently in governmental policy over the last decade.

Our study

Currently the Welsh Centre for Learning Disabilities at Cardiff University is conducting a study that examines all transition protocols that have been written in local authorities in Wales. There are 22 local authorities and we managed to obtain 21 transition protocols across the principality. We then looked in more detail at what the protocols say and whether or not they stipulate clear rules on partnership work and inclusion of carers and young people with learning disabilities. The results have been surprising and have prompted us to investigate now in more detail the way in which protocols are actually used in some local authorities in Wales. The study is in the second phase where we interview professionals in 5 Welsh local authorities in order to gauge the extent to which transition protocols have helped those involved in planning transition for young people to work together rather than separately to achieve smooth and seamless transition services

when young people leave school. Yet our study has already yielded some fascinating insights.

When we started the study we were not sure whether all local authorities in Wales actually had a transition protocol and that was the first question we asked social service directorates across all 22 Welsh local authorities. 21 of them replied positively and sent us their transition protocol. This means that practically all local authorities in Wales are working towards a transition protocol to plan multi-agency work. In order to capture the differences and similarities, as well as the advantages and shortcomings of the protocols that are in use we developed a range of questions that guided us in investigating the content of the protocols in more detail. These questions highlighted aspects such as:

- Does the protocol indicate the need to use person centred approach in planning transition for young people?
- Does it clearly outline individual responsibilities and duties for all agencies involved?
- Does the protocol make provision for the involvement of carers and young people in the planning process?
- Are external non-statutory agencies such as advocacy groups and supported employment organisations involved?
- Does an easy access version of the transition protocol exist?
- Are consent and data sharing procedures clearly outlined in the protocol?

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Most of the questions above were formulated to help us gain an insight into the extent to which carers and young people with learning disabilities were involved in the transition planning process as well as whether or not they could benefit from the input of all relevant agencies beyond the statutory services. We also felt that it would be important for professionals to understand transition protocols not just as a vehicle to bring about change BETWEEN co-operating agencies but also as a way of including parents and young people in the planning process. Person centred planning is an example at hand. Often lip service is paid to person centred planning but the fact is that approaches to person centred planning vary widely across services and including young

people in decisions that affect their lives is only possible if the process of transition planning is made accessible to them. Easy access versions of transition protocols, written in a clear way, can help in explaining the purpose and possible outcomes of the transition planning process to those that are most affected by leaving school: the young people with learning disabilities and their carers.

This is what we found

While we were clearly encouraged by the fact that practically all Welsh local authorities had a transition protocol in place, the results of our analysis revealed huge variations in the nature and content of those protocols across Wales. Less than a third of all protocols mentioned person

centeredness as the preferred approach in planning transition for young people with learning disabilities, and only 2 local authorities out of 21 had produced an easy access version of their protocol.

Other results were more encouraging. The overwhelming majority of protocols in Wales said something meaningful on the need to involve carers and young people in the planning process although they often fell short of specifying exactly how this may be achieved. Almost all protocols also outlined individual tasks and duties of professionals, something that is often seen as a key touchstone for ensuring that multi-agency work is really attuned to the needs to work with each other rather than simply work parallel to each other.

The biggest disappointment of the study so far has been the aspect of consent and data sharing. The need to put in place robust arrangements for obtaining consent from the young people and their carers for planning transition and sharing data across agencies has long been acknowledged by central and regional government. Only a few protocols however specify consent and data sharing procedures.

And what about the involvement of external agencies such as supported employment organisations, social firms and advocacy groups? The reason we wanted to find out about their involvement is that often young people who leave school face very few options for placements. The majority of young people will in fact leave school and go to a further education college. This may be what they want because they often attend the local college through link courses on a particular day in the week in their last year in school. So they may feel comfortable with making that transition to FE since their friends may go there too or transport can be arranged easily. However, we also know that attending the local college is often simply delaying the really important question: where to now?

Following college attendance many young people then will go to day centres or find no placements and stay at home without preoccupation at all.

In other words, the transition to employment or voluntary work is significantly underdeveloped across Wales despite the intense

efforts of many social services and advocacy groups over the last decade. Ultimately, opening up more opportunities for young people when leaving school is only possible if and when transition partnerships agree to effectively involve those agencies that can offer alternative placements to young people such as social firms, supported employment or voluntary organisations. We were keen to see whether protocols reflected the need to involve them in the planning process early on. However less than half of all local authorities in Wales cast the net wider than the statutory authorities that are legally bound to organise and plan transition for young people with learning disabilities. The majority of transition partnerships in Welsh local authorities fail to mention voluntary agencies and supported employment organisations as equal members in the planning process.

Where do we go from here?

Thus, the overall picture that emerges from our research is sobering indeed. The way in which most transition protocols are written at the moment in Wales may fail to address some of the very shortcomings that researchers and professionals have identified in transition planning for a long time: the lack of involvement of young people and carers as equal partners in the planning process; the failure to include external non-statutory agencies in the transition planning process; and the astonishing absence of robust consent and data sharing

arrangements.

Our study continues to look in more detail at 5 local authorities in Wales and we are aware that shortcomings in the way protocols for transition are written may contrast with excellent multi-agency work. The second phase of our study is to investigate whether protocols can play a positive role for inter-agency co-operation bringing about much needed change in the way in which transition for young people with learning disabilities from school to post-school placements is planned.

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References

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