



Department  
for Education

# **Evaluation of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Pathfinder Programme**

**Thematic Report: Transition and the engagement of post-16 providers**

**Research report**

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## Key learning points

This report was produced as part of SQW's evaluation of the SEN and Disability Pathfinder Programme for the Department for Education. It focuses on the engagement of post-16 providers in the Special Educational Needs (SEN) and disabilities () reforms, based on evidence gathered from four pathfinder areas. The key learning points from the four case study areas, useful to other areas preparing for the SEN and disability reforms were that:

- The smallish number of providers in each area meant that pathfinders had been able to engage all providers in discussions about the SEN and disability reforms. That said, there were differing levels of engagement and response across providers, with local authority relationships strongest / most productive with General Further Education College (GFECs) and most sensitive with Independent Specialist Providers (ISPs)
- All expressed concerns about how the Learning Disability Assessment process had worked in their area. The areas wanted to improve this by focussing more on the long term outcomes of employment and independent living, and asking what education could do to help the young person work towards these
- Achieving this focus on long term outcomes required: getting young people and families to think differently about options; making more effective and appropriate use of ISP capacity and expertise; and constructing a full 5-day week centred on a GFEC
- Retaining more young people in county, where appropriate, was recognised as challenging but seen as important. It was felt that by keeping people in their local area, more could be done to link the education that they received to their future life in the local community and so the achievement of longer term outcomes
- The bringing together under the new arrangements of funding and provision in the local authority, brings new pressure on the authority to seek value for money, but also greater control and incentive to do so
- Colleges were reported to have been up for the challenge and willing to engage constructively with the local authority and young people and their families
- The importance of a constructive dialogue and good flows of information were emphasised many times and are vital to achieving the changes anticipated
- In the short term there are a number of issues that require attention around: developing the Local Offer; managing family expectations; scaling up activity; and ensuring suitable accountability around outcomes
- There are also more substantial, potentially longer-term issues around: the duty to admit and how this is managed; the impact on education of other services being reduced; the scale of future demand (which is expected to grow due to past under-identification); and the need for further market development.

# 1. Introduction

## Evaluation of the SEND Pathfinder Programme

SQW was commissioned by the Department for Education to lead a consortium of organisations to undertake the evaluation of the SEN and disability Pathfinder Programme. A series of reports from the study are available on the government publications website, including two previous thematic reports on key working and workforce development, and the Education, Health and Care (EHC) planning pathway<sup>1</sup>. During the course of the research, a number of key issues were identified as requiring more in-depth review. This report focuses on one of these issues – *transition and the engagement of post-16 providers*.

## Rationale for the research

During the course of the first 18 months of the evaluation, the impact of the SEN and disability reforms on post-16 provision was highlighted as an area of common interest, and one worthy of further examination. As a wide-ranging agenda, the decision was taken to focus specifically on the transition process for young people with an SEN Statement moving on to further provision, including General Further Education Colleges and Independent Specialist Providers. The focus on transition reflected an assessment that this was where most change could be identified to this point in time, and an interest in how the new EHC plan would replace the previous Learning Difficulty Assessment (LDA).

## Research focus

This thematic report provides further insight into five main areas, summarised in the diagram below and covering the models for transition (including difference with existing models); the resources and inputs required; support to young people; and the implications of the reforms for providers.

The report is broadly structured around these themes, and where possible aims to bring out key learning based on experience to date, in terms of key contextual issues to bear in mind, feedback on how best to raise awareness and engage staff in the reform process, and important enabling factors and challenges to consider, among other issues.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/send-pathfinders#evaluation-of-the-send-pathfinders>

**Figure 1 Research questions**

<b>Involvement</b>	How well have post-16 providers (been) engaged in helping develop EHC plans and processes? How closely have they been involved in helping plan transition?
<b>Provision</b>	Is the new planning process leading to different outcomes and so new requirements from post-16 providers? How are they having to adjust provision? How aware are FE colleges and ISPs of their duties under the reforms, particularly the duty to admit? How are they communicating this through the Local Offer?
<b>Resources and inputs</b>	What are the resource implications of changing needs for provision? What staff development issues have been raised?
<b>Support to young people</b>	What support is in place to help young people move in to their new provision? Who is involved in this? How is information about the young person transferred? Is the process of supporting the young people to move in to the new provision different?
<b>Commissioning</b>	Have Commissioners had to adjust their provision mix? How are Commissioners and providers ensuring that young people with EHC plans have access to five days provision a week - particularly for 16-19 year olds in FE? Have new providers been required/available?

## Our approach

Evidence was gathered from four pathfinder areas – Manchester, Medway, Surrey and Wiltshire – via in-depth face-to-face and telephone interviews with pathfinder leads and providers engaged in the programme in each area (see Annex B for more detail on the research methods used). We would like to express our thanks to the participating pathfinders and providers, and to the Association of Colleges, Preparing for Adulthood and The Association of National Specialist Colleges for providing useful insights at the beginning of the research.

## Intended audience

This report is intended to support those responsible for engaging with post-16 providers, especially colleges, and for rolling out the SEN and disability reforms within colleges from September 2014.

## **2. Engagement of post-16 providers**

### **Expectations of the reforms**

The Children and Families Act sets out a series of expectations of providers, including:

- The duty to co-operate with the local authority on arrangements for children and young people with SEN
- The duty to admit a young person if the institution is named in an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan
- The duty to use their best endeavours to secure the special educational provision that the young person needs.

The revised SEN Code of Practice is clear that colleges should be involved in transition planning between school and college so that they can prepare to meet the student's needs and ensure a successful transition into college life. This is recognised to take time and so should begin well before the point of transition, with preparing for adulthood intended to be a part of each review from Year 9. For the pathfinders, this time has not always been available and so to date they have been using their best endeavours to make up for deficiencies in the old system and test new ways of working.

The focus on this age group also brings a changing dynamic within the family. After compulsory school age (the end of the academic year in which they turn 16), the right to make decisions under the Children and Families Act 2014 applies to them directly, rather than to their parents. It is expected that parents will continue to be involved, but the decisions rest with the young person.

### **Engagement with providers**

The four areas covered differed in size, but across all four the number of post-16 education providers was relatively small. One area had four General Further Education Colleges, but most only had one or two. In addition there were usually a similar number of specialist colleges. Two of the areas also included an Independent Specialist Provider (ISP), but two others had no local ISP. All four areas worked with ISPs located in other local authority areas.

The smallish number of GFECs / ISPs meant that areas had been able to engage all providers in discussions about the SEN and disability reforms. This was usually through having them represented on pathfinder boards and working groups and individual discussions. One area had also set up a cross area sub-group, initiated for discussion of funding changes but then used as a forum for discussion of the SEN and disability reforms.

While the picture was mixed it appears that:

- Most progress was made through one-to-one relationships, where the detail could be worked through
- Local authority relationships were strongest / most productive with GFECs and most sensitive with ISPs (for reasons we return to below).

The areas also had to bring in other services to work alongside education. This went beyond health and social care to include housing and employment services, including private and voluntary sector providers. This range of provision was seen as crucial as part of the move to focus on longer-term outcomes, not simply transitioning people in to the next phase of education.



### 3. Arrangements for transition

The importance of the transition phase was widely recognised. However, as reported by Ofsted the approach adopted varies considerably across areas, and often falls below what would be expected.

*“It’s probably THE major transition post their child’s starting school way back, because it is out to the big bad world... It’s hard... It’s a lot of pressure to get that right”* Transition team manager

**Figure 2 Ofsted concerns about the current transition process**

Inspectors found that the local authorities’ arrangements to provide learners with a learning difficulty assessment as the basis for their transition to post-16 provision were not working effectively. Providers had received a learning difficulties assessment in only a third of the case studies, where it was appropriate. These assessments were not always timely or adequately completed, which made it difficult to plan support.

In the examples seen, the criteria used for placement decisions were not always clear, local options were not adequately explored and the recommendations were not always based on an objective assessment of need.

Source: Ofsted<sup>2</sup>

While the process varied across the four areas, they all expressed concerns about how

*“Multi-agency assessment for statemented pupils was not really happening prior to the pathfinder. Often information was out of date and there were inclusions that were no longer relevant”* GFEC representative

the LDA process had worked in their area. These concerns tended to be highest where new staff had come in to post. Those who had been working in the old system offered more support for the old ways of working, while still

supporting the shift to a more person-centred, integrated approach.

The key changes that were being sought are described in the table below. The areas shared a common agenda. They wanted to **focus more on the long-term outcomes of employment and independent living**, and on what education could do to help the young person work towards these. This was expected to be achieved by:

- **Getting young people and families to think differently about options**
- **Reducing the number of young people going out of county** and the use of ISP
- ... and instead **constructing a full 5-day week** centred on a GFEC.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/news/progression-beyond-school-variable-for-young-people-learning-difficulties-and-disabilities-ofsted>

**Table 1 Changes to be achieved in moving from the old to the new system**

	Old system	Aims of the new system
Structural	<p>Characterised by a separation of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Functions – e.g. local authorities commissioning out LDA assessments to third party organisations such as Connexions</li> <li>• Functions from funding – plans agreed by the local authority but paid for by the Education Funding Agency paid.</li> </ul>	<p>Agreement of funding and provision brought together in the local authority bring new pressure on the authority to seek value for money.</p>
Approach	<p>Too often seen to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on the next education destination</li> <li>• Be driven by short term concerns of parents who understandably want their children to be safe, but may not have sufficiently high expectations.</li> </ul> <p>At the same time parents had poor access to information to make informed choices.</p>	<p>Common agreement with the aims of the reforms to focus on the longer term: what can the next stage of education do to support long-term progression to employment and independent living?</p> <p>Giving young people greater say in the process, and where necessary supporting their wishes over those of parents.</p> <p>The Local Offer has a key role to play in informing young people and parents about the range of services that they can access and so encouraging them to think constructively and differently to what has happened in the past.</p>
Operational	<p>The structural and approach issues led to a use of ISP which may not always have been appropriate.</p> <p>Services took decisions in isolation, with too little join-up between education, social care, employment etc.</p> <p>Information exchange from schools to post-16 providers was patchy, leading to new assessments being required and provision not being well planned for young people arriving at the provider.</p>	<p>All four areas expected a greater use of GFECs to provide a better route to employment and to independent living in the local area. This would be achieved through constructing a quality 5-day week for each young person, combining education and social service provision (and in some cases other services as well).</p>

Source: SQW

This shift in expected destinations was recognised as challenging, but seen as important. It was felt that by keeping people in their local area, more could be done to link the education that they received to their future life in the local community. For example, they could get: independent travel training on how to get around the area; work experience and supported internships with local employers, which may lead to local employment; and social activities with local people which may be sustainable beyond their time in education.

*“ISPs were good providers, it’s just we were asking them to provide the wrong thing”, Pathfinder lead*

*“We are not stopping using ISPs, but using them for what they can do best, and that others do not do”, Pathfinder lead*

So for example, it was thought that a young person staying locally and attending the GFEC, rather than going out of area to an ISP, could also be taken swimming through their social care support. An ISP may well have provided the swimming as well, but this would have not have been in the area in which the young person was going to live or created a group with whom they could socialise in the longer term.

This type of change will also create issues. ISPs were being encouraged to think more about day provision and integration with other services. This would suggest some move away from residential provision, with staffing and income issues following. Meanwhile GFECs were aware of the challenge that they had to offer an option that young people and their parents would be comfortable with.

*“We need to demonstrate that we can be as good as an ISP so that we are seen as a positive choice.” College staff member*

## 4. Experiences to date

The number of people receiving an EHC plan and transitioning had been fairly small in most of the areas. More plans were in place for those who will move on in summer 2014, but it was too early to say how well these would work. That said, to date the experiences were reported to be positive, in particular:

- GFECs had been up for the challenge and willing to engage constructively with the local authority and young people and their families (albeit with some challenges as described below)
- One area had seen the numbers moving out of area reduced by 30 (c25%), and another was expecting a similar change this coming year
- A set of new relationships and pathways had been developed to support young people.

**Table 1 Examples of new pathways**

Example 1	Example 2
<p>A partnership has been set up to help young people move from a special school to a mainstream college. Students attend a special unit located at the college for a full year, before transitioning into the mainstream college provision. They receive a full time programme of basic skills training, including independent travel training, life skills and confidence building. This gives them time to adjust to college life, being surrounded by many other people, in a safe environment. In its first year, 20 young people were enrolled.</p>	<p>In one area a new scheme has been set up in partnership between the GFEC and the local authority to create a pathway for young people with SEN and disability to move into employment. The scheme involves a five day package of part-time learning at the college (including English, maths and work-related skills) and part-time work experience in local businesses and services contracted by the local authority (such as leisure centres).</p>
Example 3	Example 4
<p>One young person had spent their educational life in specialist provision. This was expected to continue to age 18. However, they now also attend the GFEC and mix with a wider range of young people and are taking part in work experience through the college's nursery. There is also the likelihood of a supported internship, perhaps in the local hospital. This change was achieved through the intervention of the pathfinder team, working with the specialist provider, the GFEC and the young person's family to build aspirations and to reassure the family that the GFEC would cater appropriately for the young person.</p>	<p>A large GFEC was aware of concerns about young people with very specialist medical needs moving from special school sixth form provision to their campus. They therefore put together a package of provision spread for the five days across a number of providers: the college provided two days a week; plus half time back at the specialist provider; and half a day with the Independent Living Unit. This allowed young people and college staff to adapt to changing needs over time, while still building assurance over time with parents and the specialist provider that the young people could be looked after properly in a different setting.</p>

Within this positive picture a number of challenges had arisen for all those involved, as shown in the figure below.

**Figure 3 Challenges arising**

GFECs	Young people and parents	ISPs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Colleges highlighted <b>significant workforce issues</b> arising out of the changes. If they are to receive more young people with SEN&amp;D then they require greater staffing to support them, and additional skills among existing staff.</li> <li>• <b>The most challenging needs were seen to be around behavioural issues</b> (although health issues must also be concerned). This has not been an issue for many staff, but would be in the future and so they needed training in how to deal with it.</li> <li>• <b>Colleges need to work collaboratively with the local authority to develop wider provision, drawing in other services.</b> These relationships are an important part of the changes envisaged.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The change in approach and aspirations for young people can be challenging. It is important that support is offered to <b>raise aspirations about the future options of young people</b>, including employment and independent living. Doing so also opens up the discussion about suitable local provision.</li> <li>• <b>Young people should now have a greater say in their transition.</b> However, this can create some tensions with parents if their views differ. One area had experienced this and had supported the views of the young person, developing a plan to meet their aspirations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Careful and sensitive discussions had been required with ISPs</b> to explain the changes and the rationale behind them.</li> <li>• <b>The Pathfinders had in some cases sought to encourage ISPs to change their day offer</b>, which could enable them to work with the grain of the changes. For example, they could offer part of the 5-day week that the Pathfinders have sought to construct; and offer some of their current social activities during the day rather than in the evening to expand the group of young people who could benefit (not only those on residential placements).</li> </ul>

Source: SQW

There was a mixed response from colleges about the resourcing issues highlighted in Figure 3. For some, there was confidence that this could be found through existing budgets and by drawing on additional funds that would come with the young people, while others were less certain. This difference reflected variations in local policy and the extent to which there had/had not been detailed discussions with the local authority.

It was also recognised that some of the expected changes have not yet been fully worked through. In particular:

- **Information flows have improved but there is more to do.** It was thought that the delays reflect both getting used to the new system and schools holding back information for fear of exposing gaps or building a negative picture of the young person. However, it is a major issue for providers and they can better plan to support young people if they know more. Regular meetings between providers were seen as important in improving information-sharing.

*"We have just told the schools to give us anything they have, and we will sort through it."*  
College staff member

- **The focus to date has been very much around education**, with much less on social care and especially health. This is seen as a transitional issue, with the hope that both will rise in time and a concern that replacing the education part was the top order priority.

*“So far, it is very much an education plan with a bit of social care and health.”*

Pathfinder lead

- **Readiness for and use of Personal Budgets vary considerably across areas.** Only one of the four areas we visited reported significant activity. In the others there was little reported demand, even where a college had put in systems to help families to cope with them. One local authority was very positive about Personal Budgets and saw them as an opportunity for the local authority to save money in the long run while also helping families. They intend to build a budget for each young person around their EHC plan. It is envisaged that in the future Personal Budgets will be used for educational, social care and health services according to the respective EHC plan for each young person.

*“When families are given control of the budget to support their sons and daughters, they use it much more wisely than we would as a local authority. And they get better deals as well”* Pathfinder lead

## 5. Implications arising

### There is much to do

*“You couldn’t underestimate the challenge that we’re talking about here. Because we need to shift our own staff and our own organisation, and the new need to shift families’ thinking, we’ve got to shift an entire culture... to think about people with disabilities differently. So it’s a massive agenda....”* Pathfinder lead

It is apparent that the shift to the new approach offers considerable benefits. If areas get it right it can address issues that have existed for some time and deliver improved outcomes to young people. Delivering

these changes is challenging, and a number of key lessons emerge:

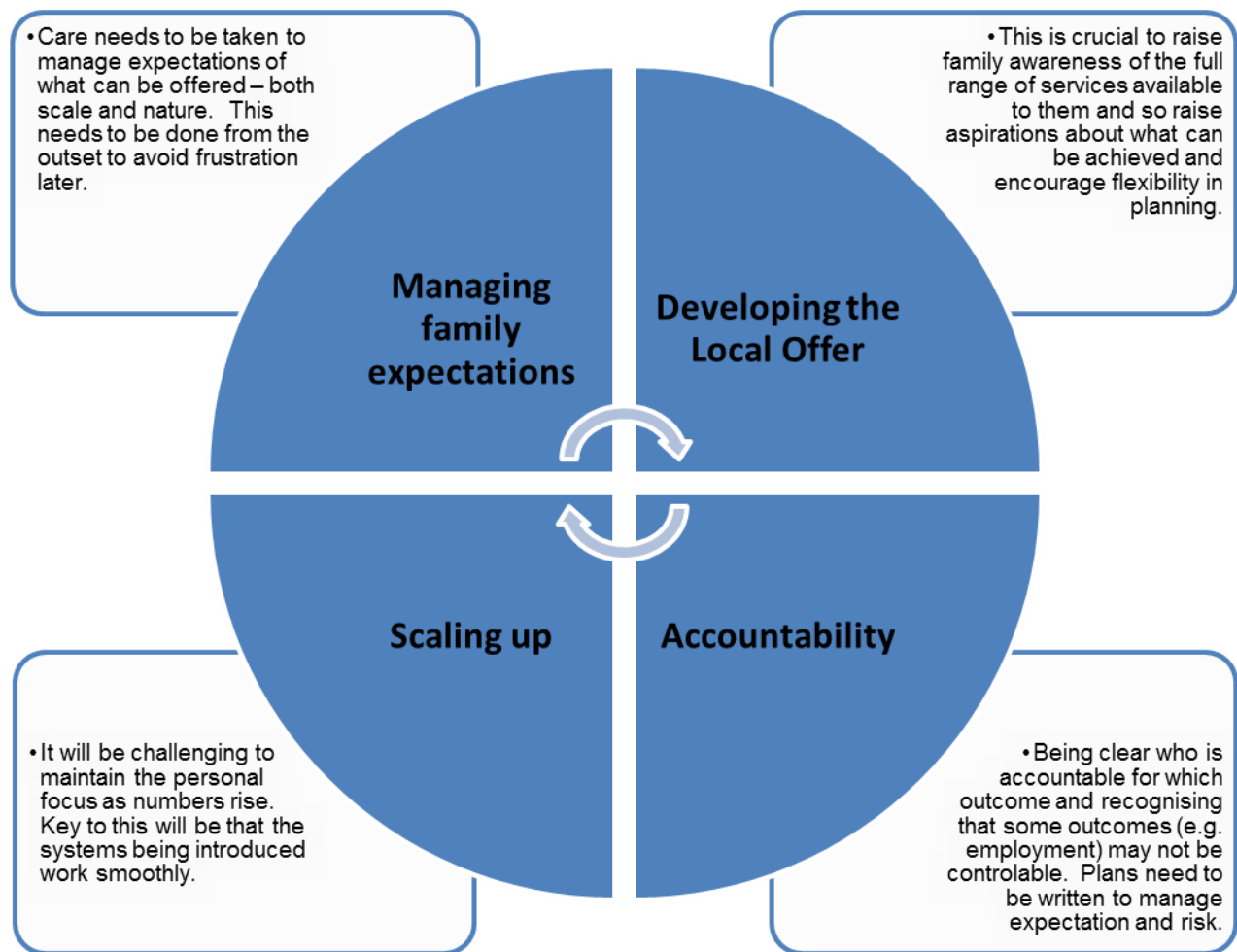
- ✓ The need to engage all providers in a constructive dialogue
- ✓ The need for providers to recognise that they will have to act differently and develop systems and people to adapt – this can give rise to significant budget issues around staffing levels and workforce skills
- ✓ Managing expectations about what can be done while at the same time raising aspirations of what can be achieved
- ✓ Being clear about and driven by long-term outcomes, rather than being constrained by short-term solutions
- ✓ Enabling each service to contribute to the longer term outcomes in a joined-up way.

### Implementation challenges

While the four areas have been encouraged by the progress that they have made, there is still a way to go. They highlighted issues which need to be worked through in the short and medium term. The key points for consideration in the short term, in advance of full implementation in September 2014 are set out in the figure below.



**Figure 4 Key short-term considerations**



Source: SQW

## Long term issues

Aside from running hard to introduce the new approach there are also a number of long-term issues which remain to be fully addressed:

- **Duty to admit.** The colleges interviewed understood their duties and were gearing up to deliver. However, there were varying levels of concern, especially around their readiness to deal with behavioural issues. To manage the expectations of families and avoid tribunal hearings, it is important that families are involved in discussions about possible destinations from an early stage.
- **Funding levels across the public sector.** Changes to the local government funding formula have led to changes across the sector. In several areas the activities being delivered are occurring with the budget running in deficit. At the same time, part of the reason for this deficit was cuts elsewhere. For example, changes in social care eligibility in one area had led to education picking up additional costs. There was concern that current cross-subsidisation may not continue.



- **The scale of demand.** Given the issues with the old system there was concern in some areas that demand had been under-identified in the past. Some of this was later picked up by colleges, but usually only when young people started to struggle. Better systems and information exchange should avoid this in the future, but will mean a greater number of transition EHC plans being developed each year (one estimate was that this could mean an increase from 300 to 500).
- **Market development.** The desired shifts in provision mix outlined above will require new ways of working by providers. Much of this is expected to come from changing activity from existing providers, including through GFECs and social care. However, some gaps were identified, including in large areas where college provision may not be close to where some people live and so access would be challenging. Such restrictions will require local authorities to consider commissioning provision from private/voluntary sector providers to ensure a broad choice remains for all young people.
- **Providers working together.** Aligned to market development, where there is a need for a constructive five day week this will often require inputs from several providers (including, for example, a GFEC and voluntary/private sector to provide social care, health and employment). The providers therefore will need to be clear about what they can and cannot offer; and collaborate around the needs of the young person, rather than working in silos.

*“We need to be clear that a College is an education provider, not there to provide social care. This has implications for five day a week provision – they will need to commission additional provision”* GFEC representative

## **Annex A: Glossary of terms**

DfE	Department for Education
nasen	National Association for Special Educational Needs
EHC	Education, Health and Social Care
EHC plan	Education, Health and Social Care plan
PB	Personal Budget
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
GFEC	General Further Education College
ISP	Independent Specialist Provider
VCS	Voluntary Community Sector

## **Annex B: Research methods**

Research was undertaken in four pathfinder areas, selected in discussion with the DfE and Pathfinder Support Team. The basis for the selection of the areas included: areas that had been working strategically and/or operationally with colleges and other post 16 providers during the reform process; areas that had engaged with the appropriate age group (16 years and over); a mix from across the regions; a mix of rural/urban and large/small areas; and at least one pathfinder champion. Scoping consultation were also undertaken with Association of Colleges, Preparing for Adulthood and The Association of National Specialist Colleges to ensure the feasibility, deliverability and usefulness of the research outputs, and identify emerging practice.

Once the four areas had agreed to participate, a scoping consultation was held with the pathfinder lead in each area to discuss the research focus and objectives, gain an overview of the transition system and the engagement of colleges and other providers in the reform process, and identify providers to participate in fieldwork.

### **Fieldwork**

Fieldwork was conducted between March and April 2014, and consisted of two key elements:

- Area-based consultations with the pathfinder lead or manager in each area, and with other professionals involved in engaging with colleges, services and the young people where relevant (including different local authority services and VCS organisations) – 15 in total across all areas
- Face-to-face or telephone interviews in each area with the service manager or transition lead in the colleges or other providers/services – 11 in total across all areas. These were designed to ensure a mix of education, training and employment, and community services, reflecting the focus of each pathfinder

The interviews followed two topic guides designed by the research team (one topic guide for the local authority representatives; and the second for the providers), covering the five broad research questions outlined on page 6 of the report. Participants were asked to set aside approximately one hour for the consultations, and all interviews were recorded

### **Analysis and reporting**

The analysis took place in two stages. Firstly, each area 'case study' was written up in alignment with the five research questions. Secondly, the research team looked across the five write-ups to explore commonalities and differences in responses across areas and the themes covered by the research questions.

The report was drafted based on these findings, with an emphasis placed on developing a 'readable' and pragmatic report, which drew on a range of experiences and would be useful to both those involved in engaging with post 16 providers, and those responsible for developing the reforms within post 16 services.



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