



**contact** *For families  
with disabled children*

## Evaluation of the Contact NI and Carers NI Transitions project in Northern Ireland

### Executive summary

Dr Helga Sneddon

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Outcome Imps Ltd.

28 Cargans Road, Tandragee, Co. Armagh, N. Ireland, BT62 2EA

Tel: +44 (0) 7894906003

Email: [helgasneddon@outcomeimps.com](mailto:helgasneddon@outcomeimps.com)

[www.outcomeimps.com](http://www.outcomeimps.com)

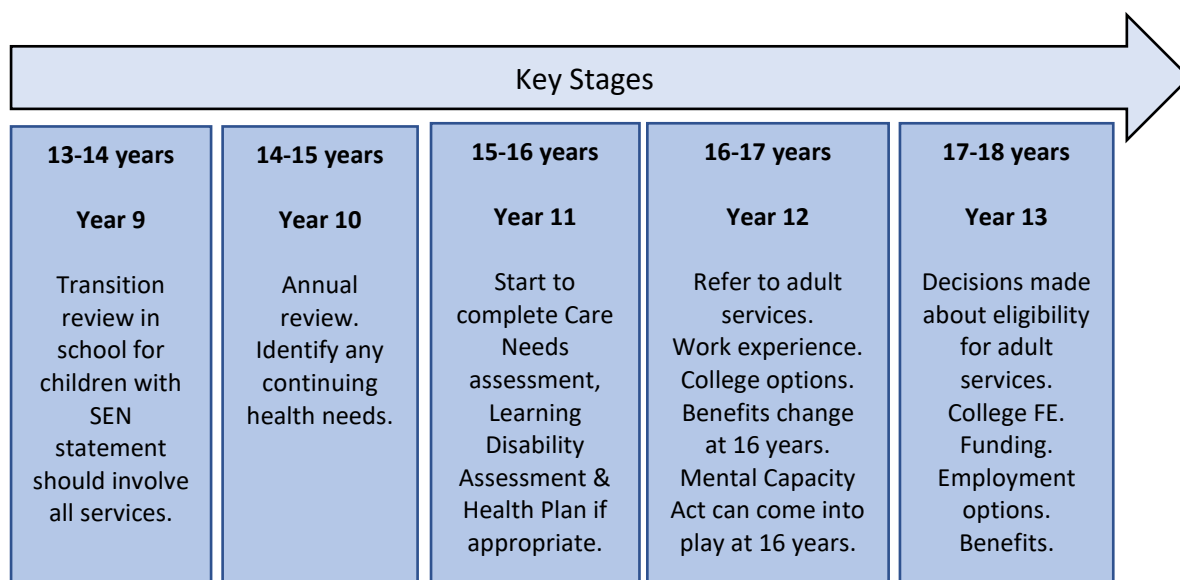
## Executive summary

In 2021, Contact NI and Carers NI secured funding from the Big Lottery Community Fund to run a 3-year programme ‘Preparing for Transition’ aimed at parent carers supporting young people with additional needs through transitions at age 16.

The Preparing for Transition project aims to inform parent carers<sup>1</sup> of disabled children about the transition from educational provision to adult life, what to expect at each stage, available support services, their rights, advocating for their young person, and their future options.

In Northern Ireland (NI) transition for disabled young people is recognised as a process which should begin around age 14 and continue over several years, with different needs coming to the fore at different ages (Figure 1).

*Figure 1: Key stages in the transition process for disabled young people in Northern Ireland*



Contact NI and Carers NI developed a programme to help parent carers support their disabled young people through transition. It includes a series of transition workshops, peer support sessions, and opportunity fairs. Parent carers are not charged for attendance at the sessions.

Key components of the approach include:

- Empowering parent carers;
- Providing parent carers with practical information and resources to increase their understanding of the transition process, who is involved at different stages and their rights;
- Strengthening parent carers’ connections with each other, the school, and other professionals and sources of support;
- Building their skills to access and negotiate the support they need.

<sup>1</sup> Contact uses the term ‘parent carer’ to include anyone with parental responsibility for a disabled child

There is also a strong emphasis on helping parent carers to actively explore with their child what they want as they transition towards adulthood, how they can help their child become more independent, and how they can make plans together for the future including identifying goals, what support they will need and practical steps for accessing this.

The programme is delivered by experienced Transition Outreach Workers in small groups of parent carers of young disabled people who are going through the transition process. Although the young people all have a statement of special educational needs (SEN), they vary widely in terms of their disability and could be attending mainstream or special schools.

An independent process and outcomes evaluation was undertaken using a mixed-methods methodology. This includes qualitative and quantitative information collected from parent carer questionnaire and interviews with parent carers, SENCOs, Transition Support Officers and other members of the Contact NI and Carers NI teams.

This Executive summary describes findings from the evaluation of delivery in terms of implementation, learning to date and impact. A full report is separately available.

The content of the programme is aligned to the areas that were identified in the scoping report as key topics that parent carers needed support with. Parent carers and SENCOs have confirmed that these are still key areas and are satisfied with the information presented, style of delivery and approach that has been developed.

The feedback from parent carers is that the programme results in improvements in each of the intended outcomes:

- Parent carers feel better informed on person-centred transition planning and support services;
- Increased parent carer confidence and efficacy;
- Parent carers feel less isolated;
- They have strategies for supporting their young people;
- Parent carers understand the importance of talking with their young person rather than making assumptions about their wants and needs. They know how and when to advocate for and with their young person;
- Parent carers gain local insight and feel more supported from sharing strategies and information with each other;
- Career aspirations for the young people are broadened and barriers reduced. Parent carers have direct links with ongoing support for transitions external to this project.

SENCOs highly value the programme and see it as complementing the work that they do in the schools directly with the young people. They see it as filling an important gap for parent carers and would like to see delivery in their schools continue.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations represent the key learning and will facilitate future planning.

1. **Plan ahead when selecting potential schools and negotiating access to take account of the academic year** - Selection of and engagement with the school are important criteria which need careful consideration early in the planning process for each delivery year. Timing is key: ideally schools should be invited to engage with the programme before the end of the academic year (around May-June) for delivery in the new term. This would mean that there is time for the school and Transition Outreach worker to plan the engagement/ promotional activity over the summer and begin sessions in October or November, so they are completed before the parent carers take part in the Transition planning meetings with the school in springtime. Using a multistrand approach with parents is important to encourage engagement.
2. **Increase the number of participants in each session** - The number of attendees in the Transition workshops and peer support sessions could be further increased. Longer lead-times to facilitate recruitment, using of multi-strand approaches through the school and in the local area are important. Engaging SENCOs to encourage individual parents is beneficial. Some parents, particularly of autistic young people may not see themselves as potentially benefitting from the workshops or see them as being relevant to them as they may not see their child as being disabled. For some parents the SENCO reaching out to them to encourage them makes a big difference as to whether they will engage. Other referral routes that are useful to consider in addition to the schools include Carers coordinators, Family support hubs, local press, community notice boards such as in leisure centres, GPs and supermarkets, and social media such as Facebook.
3. **Consider delivery location to maximise parent carer attendance** - Parents said they enjoyed going to the school where their child attended because many of them hadn't been inside the school since the child had started. Some of the SENCOs made the most of the opportunity to informally meet with the parent carers by popping in at the start of the sessions to welcome them to the school and say 'hello'. In one of the schools, the young people helped to prepare the refreshments for the group. Parent carers enjoyed this but said they would also be happy to use other venues if it meant that delivery of the programme could continue and if it made increased availability to more parent carers. Drawing participants from a range of schools and rotating the location for each session around the schools may be a useful approach to facilitate broader reach, and this is one of the approaches being used in one of the Year 3 locations.

Select schools to maximise numbers of parent carers who would be able to attend and who are most likely to benefit from the support that is being provided. Hosting sessions in community settings may increase the number of parent carers who can attend. When choosing which school to approach, it may be important to consider the number of statemented young people of transition age in the school. The type of disability appears to be less relevant as there was consistent feedback from parents, SENCOs and the Transition Outreach Workers that parent carers all have similar needs that require consideration when supporting their young person through

transitions. The core areas such as information, accessing and negotiating support do not seem to be dependent on the child's specific disability.

4. **Continue delivery with the same style and content** - The content of sessions, resources and timing of sessions should continue to be delivered in the same way. Two facilitators are needed for each workshop and sessions should continue to be face-to-face.
5. **Recruit parent carers from both mainstream and special schools with tailoring of some content to match the needs of each** - Recruiting parents from mainstream and special schools both work well, and most of the content will be the same for both. Having said that, there may be differences in expectations of independence and the level of supported employment that each young person may need. This may be reflected in what type of school they are attending. Many of the young people attending the special schools will likely need high levels of support to enter employment and the resources. The information presented in the workshops for these parent carers should continue to be tailored accordingly. Actively encouraging parent carers to reflect on their own situations, ask questions and the tailoring of the content of the peer support sessions are all strengths in the approach.
6. **Continue to actively link parent carers with local supports that are relevant for their particular needs** - Connecting parent carers with a range of local supports is very important. The balance of focusing on the range of core topics and following up on areas that the parents have raised works well. Providing information about the support available needs to be more than just providing a list of names and contact details. Providing practical information about different professionals or organisation's roles, helping parent carers figure out whether they would benefit from their support and how to contact is useful. Bringing professionals from the organisations to the sessions to speak directly with parents is also useful as it allows people to get their queries answered quickly and make connections that could be useful for ongoing or future support.
7. **Develop a sustainability and scaling-up plan** - Considering the learning from the first two years of delivery, plans should be further developed as to how to make this a sustainable approach for each area – this may involve training SENCOs or parents to deliver the sessions as envisaged in the original plan, or alternatively repeating delivery in a school every 2 or 3 years. If the aim is to support parents to lead the groups, there would likely need to be more leadership capacity-building support amongst parent carers.
8. **Consider expanding content to cover some additional topics that are key for young people's transition to adulthood** - Some suggestions for additional content included doing a session for the young people themselves, particularly focusing on key life transitions such as relationships, and how to make sure people don't take advantage of them or abuse them. Other suggestions were to integrate some of the approaches from other Contact NI programmes around self-care into the sessions, so

the parent carers are supported to meet their own needs more, as well as those of their child.

In summary, the Transitions programme has shown good development of content and approach during the first three years of delivery. There is a skilled team of Transition Outreach Workers in place who have been able to work successfully with SENCOs and engage the target audience. It has been delivered in both mainstream and special schools and successfully engaged a range of parent carers.

The findings are promising that this is an approach that may be beneficial to implement more widely across NI and potentially other jurisdictions in the UK if the material was suitably localised.