



contact *For families
with disabled children*

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

Full report

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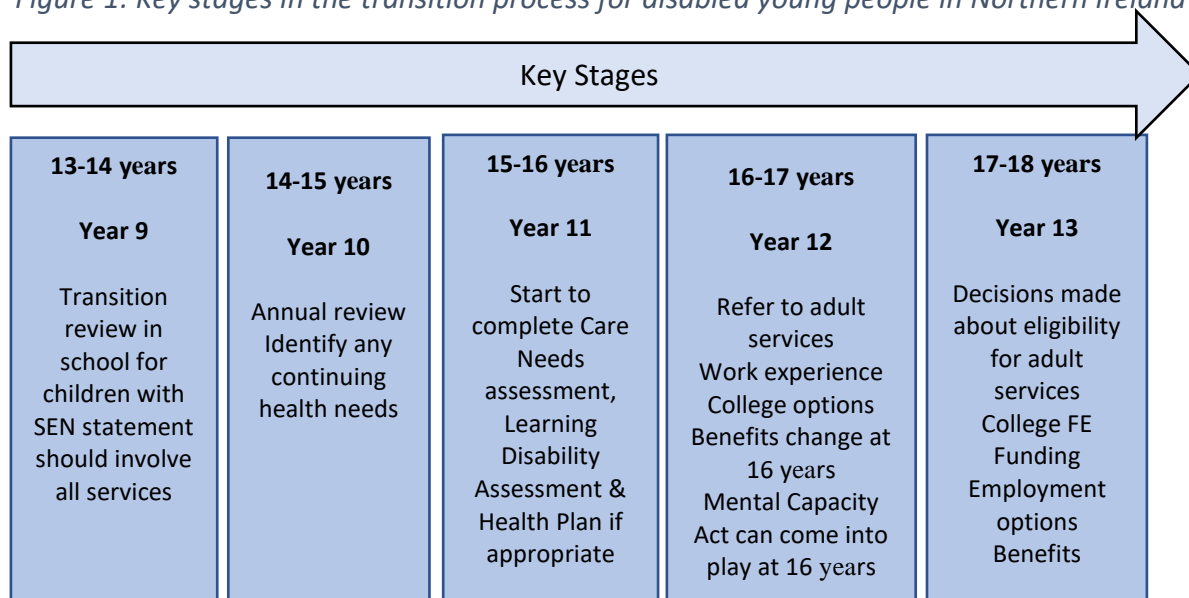
1. Introduction

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 carers¹ 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 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 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;
- Strengthening their connections with other parent carers, the school and sources of support;
- 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;
- Building their skills to access and negotiate the support they need;

¹ 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, ways to help their child develop some more independence and for them to 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. The young people vary widely in terms of their disability and could be attending mainstream or special schools. As one of the Transition Outreach Workers put it:

“What parents need to know about transition isn’t condition specific. They need information about how to navigate the system, get support, financial, transition officer, post-school support, they’re all dealing with the same issues.”

This final report describes findings from the evaluation of the first three years of delivery in terms of implementation, learning to date and impact. An Executive summary is separately available.

2. Approach taken in the evaluation

A process and outcomes evaluation was undertaken using a mixed-methods methodology. This report summarises the following data:

- Questionnaires were administered by the Transitions Outreach Workers to parents at the end of each training session. These comprised a mixture of Likert scale questions and open-ended questions. It is noted that several individuals attended more than one session and completed a feedback questionnaire for each session. In this report, the questionnaire responses are first reported as aggregated figures: the figures reported therefore reflect the number of questionnaire responses (n=152), rather than the number of parent carers. Data is then disaggregated for each session so the impact from each session can be further examined;
- Interviews were carried out with the SENCO or other staff in each school responsible for supporting engagement in the programme (staff were interviewed for 5 sites). One school did not respond to invitations from the research team or Contact NI to participate in the interview. These interviews explored the stages of exploration, fit of the programme with parental need and other provision, and perceived impact on the parents. School staff were also given the opportunity to reflect on strengths, challenges and suggestions for future delivery. Interviews with the school staff each lasted around an hour;
- Telephone interviews were carried out with parent carers who had taken part in the transition workshops each lasting around 30 minutes (n=12);
- Interviews were carried out with the Contact NI Transitions Outreach Workers and the Carers Scotland Transitions Outreach Worker throughout the implementation to explore lessons learned from delivery. Each interview lasted around an hour;
- The researcher attended regular project team meetings for feedback on the implementation of the project. Implementation was assessed according to the NIRN implementation science framework (Fixsen, 2005).

3. Project Development

In this section, an overview is provided of the development of the Transitions programme and recommendations made based on the key learning from the implementation in the first 3 years of delivery.

Identification of the need

An Awards for All grant in 2016/17 enabled Contact and Carers UK (in Northern Ireland) to carry out a scoping exercise with parent carers of disabled children that had transitioned, were going through transition or who were about to, and other professionals who work with these parent carers. Data gathered through face-to-face interviews and online questionnaires highlighted what parent carers saw as the gaps in information and what they thought would be useful for them.

The key findings described in Contact NI's application to the Lottery included that:

- 70% of parent carers said there was a lack of choice, information and support for them through the transition process. They felt they had no control over the process or the outcome. They said the process was slow and they were kept waiting for information. This led to confusion, uncertainty and stress for the family;
- In terms of what type of project they would like to see in place to support parent carers through transition, most (84%) wanted practical support, followed by information (71%) and advice (69%). About half of respondents wanted an advocacy service, and just over a quarter wanted peer support;
- When asked how they would like this project to be delivered, 74% of parent carers preferred face-to-face. 47% thought it would help to have a course before transition.

Parent carers whose child(ren) had already transitioned were asked to identify what support would have been helpful to them when they were starting out on the transition process.

These identified the following areas:

- Carers' awareness/engagement training;
- The transition process;
- Carers' rights;
- Self-advocacy;
- Person centred planning;
- Careers fairs;
- Peer support groups for parent carers whose children were going through transition as this would help to reduce isolation;
- Train-the-trainer sessions to equip parent carers with the knowledge and skills to support their peers.

Securing funding

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.

This project was to deliver transitions support to parent carers through a series of workshops which would focus on different key areas and bring parents together to reduce social isolation.

Sustainability would be promoted through training parent carers to deliver support to their peers, and through developing a single point of information resource for parent carers. Information would be broken down by age and stage in the process, with signposting to services. Other information resources would include letter templates, forms, an online community and webinars. It was anticipated that these support groups may become self-sustainable and continue once the project has ended. This would be done by upskilling parent carers as trainers through train-the-trainer workshops, and encouraging parent carers who have gone through the process to support and mentor other parent carers.

Professionals (including teachers, transitions workers, schools careers adviser, SENCOs) told Contact NI they would also benefit from access to some of the learning materials/resources, and an additional piece of work would be to run some workshops for those professionals to give them a better understanding of the reality of the transitions process and the difficulties from the perspective of the parent carers.

Developing the resources and approach

Parent carer feedback has been an integral part of shaping the development of the resources and materials throughout the Transitions project. The voices of parent carers have been influential in several different ways:

- Session content and resources were developed which focused on the recommendations from the parent carers in the scoping report;
- Discussions with the SENCOs in each school prior to delivery confirmed that the sessions were focusing on areas which were of interest and use to the parents and carers of young people in that school;
- Slides and resources were adapted in response to parent carer feedback in the workshops with small changes made after delivery in each school in preparation for the next school;
- The research team provided anonymised feedback from parental and SENCO interviews at the implementation meetings so the team could take the feedback on board as the project developed.

The project team (Transition Outreach workers, Partner and NI Manager) developed materials for workshops and peer support sessions including flyers and presentations to provide information to parent carers and to gain their feedback to improve and develop them further.

It was originally proposed that parent carers would co-design workshops with Contact NI in a more formally structured way by developing a parent advisory group (which would meet 4 times per year) and develop sustainable resources that can be used to help parent carers in the future.

During the first year, the NI Manager engaged and met with 4 parents with lived experience interested in joining the steering group and created a term of reference for future meetings. Attempts were made to convene this group to advise on the development of resources and approach. In the first two years of the project, this proved challenging, partly due to staff sickness and the need to develop resources ready for delivery during the academic year. Even so, these parent carers were able to identify useful contacts for the team particularly around facilitating introductions to schools. Steps were taken to reinvigorate the group during the third year of delivery so they could influence the development of the legacy resources and future development of the project.

The Contact NI Manager and Senior Manager also met with the Education Authority lead on transitions and transition officers to raise awareness of the project and listen to their expertise on transition. Their feedback was taken into account when developing the approach.

4. Project delivery

Transition workshops in mainstream and special schools

The Transitions programme includes 5 workshops. These sessions are designed for delivery to groups of parent carers by two Transition Outreach Workers. Each session includes a presentation on the topic as noted below, as well as time for facilitated discussion within the group.

Session 1 - Planning for transition

The first session aims to address hopes, fears and aspirations for the young people, provide an overview of the transition process, and give parent carers tools to help them lead the way. This session covers:

- The transition process detailing the roles of the young person, the parent carer and other professionals, as well as what and when it should happen;
- Changes to finances, social and health care, and education;
- Parent carers are given a template to help them start to plan for transition.

Session 2 - Person-centred planning for your young person

Person centred planning aims to put children and young people at the centre of planning and decisions that affect them. When children are meaningfully involved, this can change their attitude, behaviour and learning and make them active partners who work with adults to bring about change. This second session covers:

- What person-centred planning is and how it can help meet the young person's needs;
- Tools to help with person-centred planning;
- Identifying what options might be available.

Session 3 - Your carers' rights and entitlements

The carers' rights session supports parent carers to understand their rights as carers, explore the different types of financial support that are available, learn about workplace rights and discover other support available to them. Information includes:

- Legal rights to carers assessments and direct payments;
- Understanding carers' rights at work and how to be assertive in negotiating them;
- Health and Social care Trust support such as local Care Coordinators and other social services support for carers;
- Carers Assessment, Direct payments, Allowance and Carers Credit;
- Other forms of support.

Session 4 - What is advocacy/self-advocacy?

The Advocacy/ self-advocacy session covers advocacy, looks at the roles of carers within the system, what rights they have and helps parent carers to develop skills for negotiating these. It also helps parent carers to have realistic expectations through recognising that self-advocacy is about getting their voices heard and upholding their rights, and not necessarily getting everything they want. Information includes:

- Learn the tools and skills for self-advocacy;
- Assertiveness, good communication practice and negotiation skills;
- Understanding body language and tone of voice.

Session 5 - Planning for the future

The aim of the 5th session is for parent carers to develop their transition planning further. They learn more about opportunities for their young person. They are also asked to identify other topics and areas of support that they would like to know more about. This involves facilitated exploration about different areas relevant to transition such as:

- Leaving school;
- Getting a job/ training;
- Moving out;
- Going out/ leisure activities;
- Having a relationship;
- Money Matters;
- Health Matters.

The parent carer is asked to consider a range of questions for each area with their young person including:

- Where would I like to be?
- What support/ information do I need?
- Where can I source this information/ support?
- How do I know I'm there?

Two examples of completed forms are shown below showing some of the variation in the needs of individual young people and in the support they need around transition²:

² These copies are have been re-handwritten as exact copies of the originals in order to maintain parent carer confidentiality

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Transition to Adulthood - Planning for the future

Where am I?	Where would I like to be?	What support/information do I need?	Where can I source this information/support?	How do I know I'm there?
Leaving school	They want to go to university	If they 'go away' to study, issues	? until I know where he is going	When it's all in place.
Going to college	Need to complete A' levels & apply to UCAS	around funding & support for housing/learning opportunities available.	? Internet searches	When a placement is found
Getting a job/training	applying for work experience.	opportunities available.	? uni.	When it happens.
Moving out	may be uni related.	what's available where needed.	? internet.	When he's involved in activities.
Going out/Leisure Activities	more variety & frequency	what's on and where (groups + individuals)	? ? ?	When he is in a relationship.
Having a relationship	He wants to have a wife & family eventually	He needs to meet someone!	Solicitor	paperwork in place
Money Matters	budgeting (future planning)	legals - will making	Trust / Charities.	provision in place.
Health Matters	Healthy & support for diagnosis	More than health trust related to condition.		

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Transition to Adulthood - Planning for the future

Where am I?	Where would I like to be?	What support/information do I need?	Where can I source this information/support?	How do I know I'm there?
Leaving school	Training programme.	What's available	Information meetings what's out there?	I don't - I may in the future
Going to college	Possibly FE	Again, need to know		
Getting a job/training	Think training would suit.	Catering Beauty	Schools, SW, Agencies.	Don't know!
Moving out	- Possibly sheltered accommodation.		Speakers Support groups Information session from groups / SW / schools	SW
Going out/Leisure Activities	what's available in the area.			
Having a relationship	Not likely, but friendships	groups through	School & respite	
Money Matters	How am I able to manage	guidance on legalities	Speakers - Professional knowledge	Listen to guidance
Health Matters	Thyroid Sleep apnoea. Mobility	further investigations	Health professionals Community Support	Continued support. Supervision

A further series of 5 peer support sessions is then run for each group of parent carers with the content tailored to topics that parent carers say they want to find out about. This is a mixture of the Transitions Outreach Workers sourcing information and facilitating discussion around various topics or bringing in an invited speaker to focus on a particular area. There is also time for discussion amongst the group and opportunities to raise other areas of concern.

The peer support sessions provide opportunities for guest speakers to attend sessions to address needs identified by the parent carers, and also make connections with individuals for providing ongoing support if needed. The delivery of the session is still coordinated and facilitated by the Contact NI Transitions Outreach workers but in terms of the selection of topics to focus on these sessions could be considered to be parent-led. The sessions in the first two years of delivery have included additional input from charities and groups including Cedar Foundation, Family Fund, IncredAble, ARC NI, Consumer Council, Community Advice, Informed Choices, Advice Space and MACs Supporting Children and Young People, solicitors, Health Trusts, Make the Call, Now Group, Autonomie, Next Step Transition and Angel Eyes.

To give a sense of how this worked in practice, the Transitions Outreach Worker provided the following case study:

“Jim is a teenage boy with a learning disability. He was transitioning from school and did not want to continue education, but rather work in a building firm. The mother was very concerned about this as she didn’t feel that her son was fully aware of the risks involved in working in this environment and of the safety measures that needed to be put in place. She also felt that whilst she did not want to disempower her son, she was concerned that there just wasn’t a full enough appreciation of the risks involved as her husband struggled at times to accept that their son had additional needs. This was causing a lot of upset and conflict at home. We invited Cedar Foundation Inclusion Works project worker to a peer support meeting. He was able to listen to the mother’s concerns and offer a solution whereby they could conduct a home visit with the family to assess the son’s wishes and find out what his level of additional need would be. They could also assess the working environment and offer guidance and training to the employer to raise awareness and recommend any measures that needed to be put in place. This provided the mother reassurance and support for herself, son, and family.”

Peer sessions are hosted in a local community setting, rather than in the schools. This provided opportunities for parent carers from other schools to attend and meet one another.

5. How much was delivered?

Delivery of the full programme

In the first year of delivery, Transitions workshops and peer support sessions were delivered to groups of parent carers whose children attended two mainstream schools: St Paul’s High School, Bessbrook and De La Salle school in Belfast.

In the second year of delivery, Transitions workshops and peer support sessions were delivered to groups of parent carers whose children attended two special needs schools: Sperrinview Special school and Knockevin Senior High.

In the third year of delivery, Transitions workshops and peer support sessions took place in Arvalee resource centre (Omagh) and Magherafelt partnership of secondary and special schools.

A spotlight on the delivery and impact in each site is provided from page 41 onwards.

Parent carers were encouraged to attend all sessions but there was no penalty if they dropped 'in and out' of the programme. Attendance varied across sessions. In total:

- 25 people attended the Advocacy sessions;
- 28 people attended Carers Rights sessions;
- 34 people attended person centered planning;
- 31 people attended planning for the future;
- 39 people attended planning for Transition;
- 38 people attended peer support sessions.

Condensed sessions in additional schools

During the second year of delivery, principals from two additional schools approached Contact NI as they identified a need within their school community and had heard about the Transition project from their colleagues in other schools. The team delivered 2 condensed workshops to 36 parent carers at Rathore Special School and Donard Special School. These sessions covered key points from the longer workshops in a one-off 2 hour session.

Careers fairs

The original plan was to run 4 careers fairs each year. These intended to:

- Increase the visibility of organisations supporting young disabled people;
- Strengthen the connections between schools and these outside organisations to create longer-lasting networks and relationships.

Following feedback from the schools and engagement with families, the setting for the careers fairs was changed from being school specific, to being hosted in community settings which would have a broader reach. These opportunity fairs brought a range of providers together in a setting outside the school. This had the benefit of opening up attendance to parents and carers from a broader range of local schools who may not been able to attend the Transition workshops and peer support sessions, and who may have been less likely to attend an event at a school that their child is not involved with.

During the first 2 years of delivery, 2 Opportunities Fairs were run (one in Balmoral Hotel and one in Armagh City Hotel). Representatives from 31 organisations attended these in addition to 182 parent carers, young people and professionals. In the third year of delivery, 2 more Opportunity fair were run: one in Omagh (organised by the Education Board but with Contact participation and stand attended by 2 young people, 5 parent carers and 12 professionals), and one in Magherafelt (attended by 32 parent carers and 31 professionals).

Three Information Days were also hosted in:

- Brookfield Special School attended by 36 parent carers;
- Castle Tower attended by 23 parent carers;
- South West College, Omagh attended by 52 parent carers.

6. How well did they do it?

Transitions workshops

Parent carers completed a questionnaire after each session which included questions about delivery. There was a high level of satisfaction amongst parent carers. Nearly all of those who provided feedback from the schools (98.7%, n=148 out of 150 responses) said they would recommend Contact NI services to others (71.3% strongly agreed [n=107] and 27.3% agreed [n=41]). Two neither agreed nor disagreed (1.3%).

Similarly, there was also a high level of satisfaction in the feedback from parent carers in the additional school's condensed sessions saying they would recommend Contact NI services to others (94.7% strongly agreed [n=18] and 5.3% agreed [n=1]).

Parent carers in the interviews spoke about how they valued the skills of the Transitions Outreach Workers in making them feel comfortable during the sessions. They appreciated the Transitions Outreach Worker's skills, approachability and willingness to help:

"[The Transitions Outreach Worker] was brilliant. She didn't come across as someone with just another set of slides. She really knew what she was talking about and she was really interested in helping you - if she didn't know the answer, she went and found out and she'd get you the answer."

As one SENCO put it:

"[The Transitions Outreach Worker] was extremely knowledgeable about the organisations and opportunities available to our pupils leaving school. Not only was the information disseminated extremely useful to the parents who attended the workshops, it provided them with the opportunity to chat to each other, share information, make friendships and create opportunities to meet up even after their children have left school."

SENCOs also appreciated the willingness of the Transition Outreach Workers to collaborate with them in terms of working out the best way to approach parent carers, where and when to hold the sessions and so on. The SENCOs we spoke to as part of the evaluation highly recommended the Transition programme for their parent carers and were keen to have it run again in their schools. They would also recommend it to other schools to run for their parent carers.

Topics covered and style of delivery

Parent carers enjoyed the interactive nature of the sessions. The mixture of presentation of topics and time for discussion in the transition workshops worked well. The topics covered in the sessions addressed the areas which had been identified in the scoping study as what parent carers needed to know.

Parent carers and SENCOs all agreed that the topics covered in the sessions were highly relevant to the needs of the parent carers. Sessions were seen to be the right length. There

were no suggestions for any topics which should be omitted from future delivery, or for any topics which should be added into the first 5 transitions workshops. The parent carers appreciated the flexibility of being able to ask about areas that were particularly of interest to them.

Parent carers also liked that the presentations often covered topics that they had not previously considered, but that they discovered were highly relevant to them. They valued being able to ask questions and that if the Transitions Outreach Workers did not know the answer, they would go and find out and come back with more information in the next session. They enjoyed the opportunity to share with other parent carers and have their experiences listened to. Several of the parent carers highlighted that this was the first time they had really got to spend time and got to know parents of other young people in their child's school.

As one mum put it:

"It was a nice wee group – even though some of us have had children in the same class for a few years, this gave us a chance to see and meet each other for the first time. And you have a link with these people now – you can maybe pick up a tip, share your perspective. Makes you feel less alone."

Selecting and engaging schools

Decisions about which schools to approach were made by the Contact NI team based on type of school, geographical spread and whether the school was a mainstream or special school. Engaging schools was more successful with some than with others and the key learning from this set-up phase is outlined below.

In most delivery locations, the Contact NI team made direct contact with the schools to introduce them to the project, explain what was involved, what the potential benefits for parents of taking part, and negotiate the school's involvement. The team had direct and ongoing contact with the SENCO or other key staff in the school from initial engagement and throughout delivery.

In the third year, rather than making initial contact with an individual school in Magherafelt, contact was made with the Magherafelt Learning Partnership in order to reach its 6 member schools. The Contact NI team met with school principals to introduce the project and ask questions. The Contact NI team then sent information about the programme to the Coordinator of the learning partnership who then circulated it to staff in the individual schools. Schools then made a decision as to whether to follow-up with the Contact NI team and participate, rather than Contact NI approaching individual schools directly.

There was consistent feedback from SENCOs, teaching staff and Contact NI team that taking time to build a relationship directly with the school staff and discuss what was involved in the project was very important. Clear explanations of what the programme involved, having the opportunity to discuss how it would complement or fit with what the school already offered, and being able to see the materials so the school was familiar with the content of the programme and assured of their accuracy were all seen as critical for success.

Ongoing contact directly between the school and Contact NI staff was seen as crucial. It gave both the opportunity to understand each other's needs and preferred ways of working, as well as ensure that programme content was appropriately adapted for the needs of the school's parent carers and would complement ongoing work being done in the school with the young people. This was seen to be a more successful strategy than relying on one-off briefings.

Whilst initial circulation of information through a network or partnership to schools may be potentially beneficial in terms of increasing initial visibility with schools, it was seen as important to have direct one-to-one follow up with each individual school. Otherwise, it was difficult to engage or follow-up with the schools. There was also potential for breakdowns in communication and lack of understanding about what the programme involved.

The staff in the schools that we talked to who received information through the partnership would have preferred more information about the programme and its content, and more direct contact with the Contact NI team in advance of delivery. This would have reassured the school that the content of the programme was suitable for the parent carers of their young people (particularly since parent carers whose children are at different stages will require different information) and provide important opportunities for the school to ensure that the information provided was accurate.

Identifying who the key staff are in a school to liaise with was also an issue that should be considered in future delivery. It should not be assumed that the SENCO is always the appropriate point of contact. Other staff may be involved and the school should be able to identify the appropriate person as part of the initial discussions. This initial contact and exploration stage of set up with each school takes time, and its importance should not be minimised.

Key learning also highlighted that initial engagement with schools needs to occur well in advance of delivery, for example before the end of the school year preceding delivery (such as May or June) to negotiate and plan for delivery in the next academic year (such as October onwards). This learning was highlighted during year 1 of delivery and was a consistent observation throughout implementation that planning with schools needs to be done as early as possible and sensitive to the rhythm of the school year.

Deciding where to host the sessions is a key point to consider and this needs to be discussed with schools early in the set-up phase. In the first year, sessions were delivered in the schools. In the second and third years, sessions were delivered in a mixture of school premises and community venues. School staff highlighted that it could be difficult to provide rooms within schools for the sessions. Some parents who attended sessions in their child's school reflected that there had previously had few opportunities to be in the school (particularly if their child used School transport). They enjoyed being in the school. Most parents did not, however, have strong preferences about whether sessions should be delivered in a community or school venue – to them it was more important the sessions reached as many people as possible.

However, when given a choice between whether sessions should be online or face-to-face, parent carers did have a clear preference. Most preferred face to face delivery, explaining that this provided them with important opportunities to talk with and share experiences with other parent carers which they thought would be lost in an online environment.

There was consistent feedback from schools that they saw the Transitions programme as providing support to parent carers that they would not be able to provide themselves and that was not being provided in any other way. As one member of a school team put it:

"[The Transitions Outreach Worker] was extremely knowledgeable about the organisations and opportunities available to our pupils leaving school. Not only was the information disseminated extremely useful to the parents who attended the workshops, it provided them with the opportunity to chat to each other, share information, make friendships and create opportunities to meet up even after their children have left school."

All the school staff we spoke to suggested that delivery should continue to be done in the same way by an outside organisation, rather than trying to train school staff to deliver the programme. Barriers to teachers or other school staff taking on delivery themselves included that they would not have the capacity to deliver the programme, and they did not have they have the understanding or connections that the Carers NI and Contact teams had. Some school staff also highlighted the importance of parents hearing information from people outside the school as this reinforced the messaging from the school. As one SENCO put it:

"It's good to have someone independent to the school – it lands differently than if a teacher delivers the same thing."

Having said that, schools still wanted to receive information about the sources of support so they could also flag them to parent carers needing support. Sharing information with schools was also important, e.g. providing staff with the list of resources that parents were being signposted to. This request to share key information with schools was not with the intention that schools would be able to deliver the programme themselves, but rather so they could remind parent carers of the content or signpost them to the resources again in the future. As one teacher put it:

"It would be useful to have a leaflet on useful sources of support or some of the key points that you could give parents. That could remind those who attended the programme, as well as flag it to parents who have not yet had a chance to attend if the programme was only being run every couple of years."

It was an important enabler for schools that they did not have to pay for Contact NI to deliver the programme, particularly in this phase where it was being delivered to their parents for the first time. The funding for this phase of development was for three years so a source of funding would need to be sourced to support future delivery. Schools highlighted that their budgets were under pressure and it may be difficult for them to be able to fund delivery no matter how useful they found the programme. It was a common theme in the interviews that parent carers should not be expected to pay to attend.

All the schools that we spoke with said that they would support the programme being offered to parents from their school again in the future, and would recommend it for

parents in other schools. School staff did caution that there is a need for ongoing quality appraisal of the content of the programme, both in terms of tailoring the relevance of the content for parents whose children are in special schools compared to mainstream schools, but also in terms of ensuring the accuracy of the information being presented.

Reaching and engaging parents

Schools were responsible for identifying parent carers who would be eligible to attend the sessions and encouraging them to attend. Schools used a multi-layered approach to this that included strategies such as putting posters up, emailing all parents, putting information into Parent apps and on the website, as well as following up in-person or by telephone to encourage individuals to take part. Some of the schools also had team discussions with school staff so they could collectively identify the parent carers who would be most likely to benefit. Some schools offered to look after the young people if the session was after school. Some also offered to pay transport costs such as taxis for any parent carers who needed this support in order to participate.

Recruiting parent carers took time and energy from both the school team and the Transitions Outreach workers. It was useful when school staff got information to help them publicise the workshop to parent carers (such as flyers and templates for letters). It was also important that schools could start this process as early as possible in the academic year so they had time to spread the word about the programme and stimulate interest in attendance. This was often done through a sequenced and multi-stranded approach which took time such as giving information to everyone, and then following up with individuals. This outreach approach also gave parent carers enough time to digest the information, recognise that the programme was personally relevant to them, might be worthwhile and feel like they were ready to engage with it.

Uptake in the first year from the mainstream schools was lower than anticipated. There was better uptake in the second year. It is not uncommon in new projects for uptake to be lower at the start when the project is new and engagement strategies and promotional materials are being refined. It is also not unusual for different rates of engagement to be seen in different locations depending on what else is being offered in each setting, the readiness of the setting to support the new initiative, and also differences in the readiness of the potential participants to recognise that the programme addresses a relevant need for them. In this project, the differences in uptake may also reflect a difference between the mainstream and special schools in terms of the number of eligible pupils in each school, and also the level of support that young people are likely to need throughout the transition process and therefore how personally relevant parents may see the sessions as being to their individual circumstances.

All school staff interviewed said it would be easier after the first year of delivery in a school to attract parent carers to the workshops because of how powerful 'word of mouth' from previous attendees would be. They recommended that offering the programme once every 2 years would be more beneficial, rather than it being a 'one-off'. Similarly, the feedback from the parent carers in the interviews suggested a similar schedule with delivery every two years would provide enough regularity that people could access the sessions when they were most relevant to them, and also gain from some 'top-up' support as their children got

older. Having parent carers attend whose children were at different stages of the transition process was useful in terms of them sharing their experiences and learning from each other.

Timing

The timing and delivery of the sessions suited the needs of the parent carers and was workable from the schools' perspective. Part of the learning from the first year was that it would be important to approach schools before the end of an academic year, ideally around April-May time to negotiate delivery and give adequate time for recruiting families. Delivery of sessions could then start in October or November for completion of the transition workshops before the transition meetings with the school happen around late springtime.

Delivery once a month appeared to suit most parent carers. Some said that the sessions could be more frequent so momentum is not lost (e.g. delivering one session as week), whilst others suggested that more than once a month would be difficult to parent carers to fit in with their work and caring responsibilities.

Similarly, views were mixed as to whether it would be better to run sessions during the day (when the child was at school) or in the evenings. The consensus from interviewees was that it would not be possible to find a time that would suit everyone. Running sessions during the day may offer benefits because the young person is at school so no additional care is needed, but parent carers who were working may have to negotiate time off to attend which could be challenging particularly if they also had to take time off from work to attend medical appointments, etc. Parent carers said that it was useful to know what the content of the session was in advance so they could prioritise attendance at the sessions of most interest to them if they could not attend all the sessions. Being able to later collect the resources from any sessions that they did not attend was also seen as very helpful.

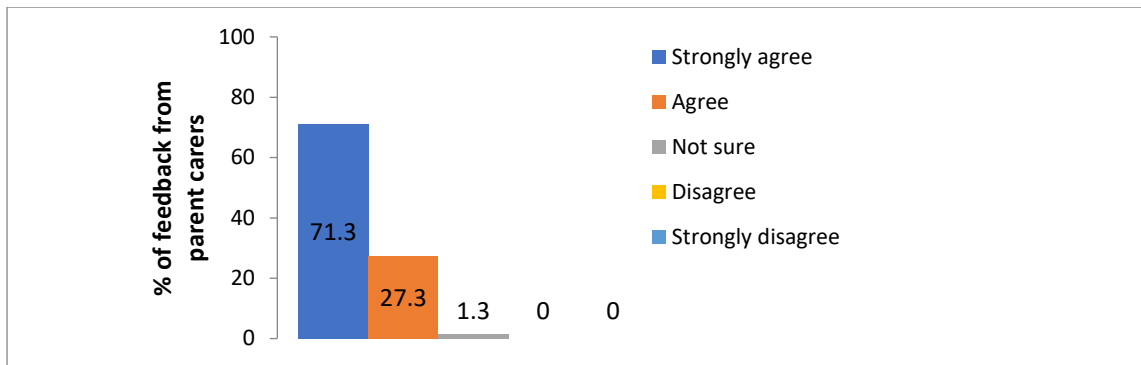
Face to face or blended delivery

Parent carers, school staff and Transitions Outreach Workers all expressed a preference for face-to-face delivery, particularly in the early sessions where a group was being established and people were getting to know each other. Some people suggested that one or 2 sessions could be delivered online if they are particularly 'information heavy'. If a session was to be run online, then both the presenter and the audience should be online.

Willingness to recommend the programme to others

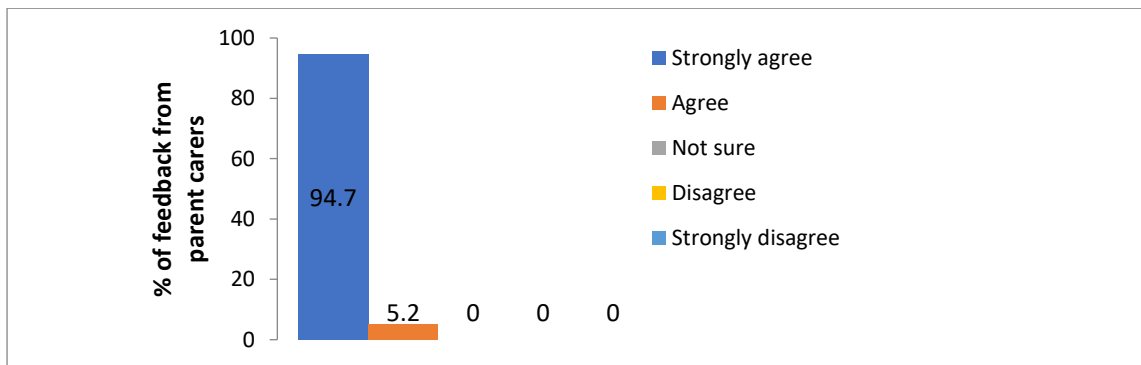
Nearly all of those who provided feedback from the schools (98.7%, n=148 out of 150 responses) said they would recommend Contact NI services to others (71.3% strongly agreed [n=107] and 27.3% agreed [n=41]). Two neither agreed nor disagreed (1.3%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Percentage of feedback from parent carers in the Transition programme who said they would recommend Contact services to others



Similarly, all respondents who participated in the condensed workshops were also keen to recommend the Contact services to others (94.7% strongly agreed [n=18] and 5.2% agreed [n=1]) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Percentage of feedback from parent carers in the condensed programme who said they would recommend Contact services to others



School staff were also keen that the programme would run again in their schools and would recommend them to other schools. As one SENCO put it,

“I would suggest that the workshops provided would be so beneficial if they were run on an annual or bi-annual basis in school as it would allow all parents of our transition age pupils to access all the valuable information that the parents of last year’s pupils received.

This was one of the best attended and most useful workshops hosted by the school. We would have no hesitation in agreeing to host this programme in future.”

Another said:

“I was delighted that the parents from my school were able to engage in this innovative transition programme. The facilitators were very welcoming and encouraging to our parents and there was a real buzz during each session. I highly recommend the programme to others as it was delivered in a friendly and encouraging way. It allowed our parents to develop their knowledge of transition, to build connections and to feel less isolated when supporting their children to make big decisions during the transitional times in their education.”

Careers fairs

Six careers fairs were run throughout the lifetime of the project. Participation and feedback data was collected during the first 2 years of delivery at the Opportunities Fairs run in the Balmoral Hotel and Armagh City Hotel, and this is presented below. Representatives from 31 organisations attended these in addition to 182 parent carers, young people and professionals. Feedback forms were completed by 52 attendees (40 parents, 2 relatives, 2 young people, 8 professionals and 1 who described themselves as 'other'). Nineteen of the 40 parents who provided feedback had attended one of Contact's workshops.

Most people who provided feedback said they heard about the fair on Facebook (58.8%, n=30), from the school (11.5%, n=6), from Contact Staff (9.6%, n=5), from a friend or relative (7.8%, n=4), or email (7.8%, n=4).

Those providing feedback were highly satisfied with most ($\geq 96\%$) rating the venue, catering timing, information and overall quality of the event as being Excellent or Good. No one said any aspects of the event were poor or very poor.

There were a variety of responses with respect to what stalls people found most useful (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of participants who found specific stalls most useful in the Opportunities Fairs

Name of group	Number of participants who mentioned this as being most useful (some people mentioned more than one so total is more than the 52 people providing feedback)
All	15
Clanrye	11
Contact	7
SRC	7
NOW	5
Springvale	5
Kids Together	4
Parkanaur	4
Skills for Life	4
Autonomie	3
Belfast Met	3
Bolster	3
Make the call	3
18-25yr age programmes	2
Appleby Trust	2
Carer's NI	2
Direct payments	2
Mencap	2
Print It	2

USEL	2
Benefits Advice	1
Camphill	1
Carer's Advice	1
Cedar Foundation	1
CIL	1
Disability Action	1
Family Fund	1
Mourne Grange	1
NHS	1

In terms of what attendees thought was missing, suggestions from some of the fairs were for specific organisations to attend such as Disability Action, Mencap, Cedar Foundation, social groups and down time options for teens with special needs, IncredAble, Finance, Education support services, NOW group, Specialistirne, social workers, carers help for families, information on complex needs providers, Education Authority, horticulture opportunities, and Trust transition service/ day opportunities within the Trust. Some of these were in attendance in some careers fairs, but not at all.

Thirteen of the stallholders provided feedback (5 from Balmoral and 8 from Armagh). They were all satisfied with the communication in the lead up to the event. There were good levels of satisfaction with the venue, catering, timing of the event, table size, parking and overall satisfaction (>85% rated as good or very good on each aspect). Twelve out of the 13 said they would like to provide a stall at any future events hosted by Contact. Most shared the event on their social media platforms (11 out of 13 organisations). Most said they had good engagement with attendees (12 out of 13).

Feedback from stallholders included:

"It was great to get the chance to tell people about our organisation and the services we provide as we are still unknown to many."

"I also had quite a lot of follow up work to do with attendees after the event."

"Yes and no - I met families and spoke a little about young carers."

"Yes, lots of contacts made."

"I think we were not the service people were looking for."

All the organisations said they were able to network with other stall holders. Comments included:

"Great to find out about other organisation for signposting in the future."

"Could have spent more time on this - got to learn a lot about the organisations I did talk to. Ran out of time."

“Met some organisations that I was unaware of.”

“I was able to network with a few stall holders but, due to the demand on my stall I didn't have time to speak with everyone.”

“Good to meet other organisations.”

Eleven of the 12 stall holders said that the event was worthwhile. Feedback included:

“Very much so.”

“Very well organised event.”

“Good communication both before with emails and during the day of the event.”

“Overall while it is good to raise awareness i think this was more for people who were not young carers.”

“Yes and no.”

“We have two new members.”

Suggestions for future planning included:

“On arrival the setup wasn't good - indeed there was no space for us. We felt out of the general flow of other tables.”

“A video presentation about/from the host company introducing everyone and detailing the event outcomes and possible future dates - could be played on a loop with contributions from organisations attending.”

“Making the event possibly during the evening to allow young people to attend the event.”

“More attendees would have been great as a lot of time sitting idle.”

“Everything was grand.”

Staff in schools also saw the Careers Fairs as useful and informative for their staff teams. It made them more familiar with support available to parent carers. As one commented:

“We found the transition fair that was held in [the local] Hotel very useful for school staff to become aware of the different organisations providing services which would be useful to the parents of the school leavers. It was great to talk to the representatives of the various organisations so that if we were approached by parents in the future, we could signpost them towards the different services and organisations.”

7. Impact on outcomes: Is anyone better off?

The impact on outcomes was evaluated using parental questionnaire, and interviews with parent carers, SENCOs, and the Contact NI and Carers NI team.

The programme aimed to support the following improved outcomes for parent carers in the short-term:

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

The data shows that the project is successfully improving these outcomes by the end of delivery with the group of parent carers from each school.

In the next section, the feedback regarding the parent carers in the schools who received the full programme is presented first. Feedback is then presented from the parent carers who attended condensed sessions in the additional schools.

Impact of the full programme of sessions

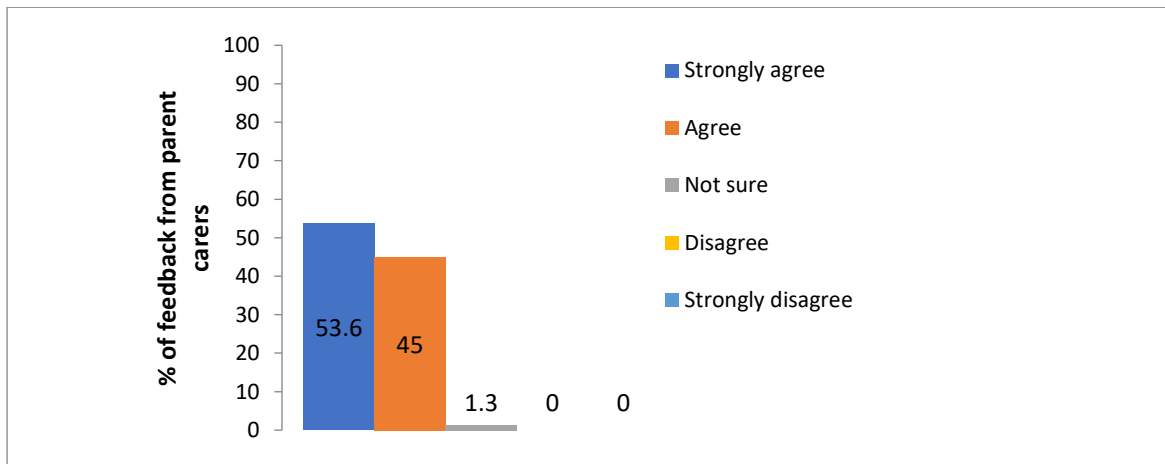
Increasing parent carers' knowledge about what support is available

The transitions workshops were designed to provide parent carers with information in several ways including by presentation, printed and emailed resources, and through facilitated discussion and experience sharing with other parent carers. A core set of topics relevant to transitions were discussed, as well as people being able to ask questions and have these answered.

During every session and in the opportunity fairs, parent carers were given practical information about the names of local support agencies and details of how to access these (including telephone numbers and website details), as well as the opportunity to meet representatives from some of the organisations. Information was also provided about how these various sources of support could be useful with explanations about what their role was in the transitions process. Parent carers were also encouraged to reflect in the planning sessions about what type of support they might need.

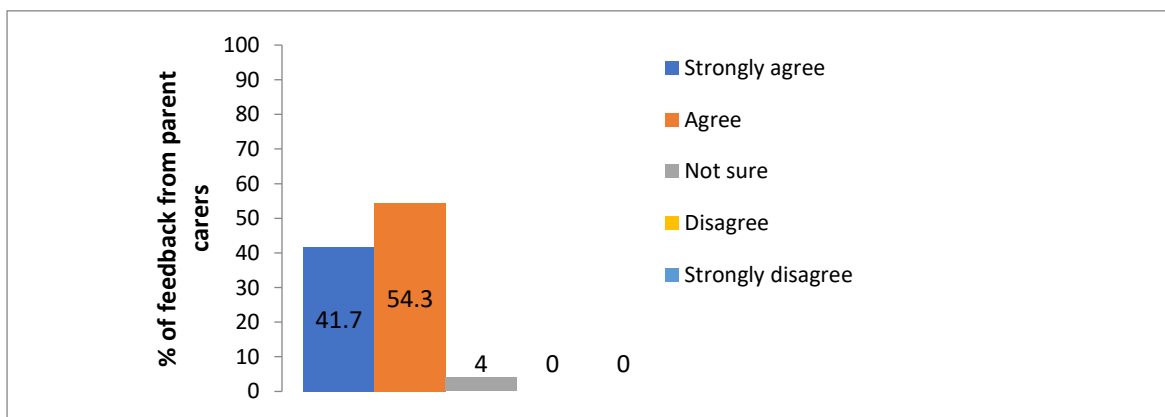
Nearly all the feedback from parent carers in the schools (98.7%, n=149 out of 151) said that they felt better informed about how to get the support they needed. Two responses were neutral (1.3%) saying they neither agreed, nor disagreed (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Percentage of feedback from parent carers in the Transitions programme who said they felt better informed about how to get the support they need



Nearly all the responses (96%, n=145 out of 151) reflected having a greater understanding of the ideas and resources that can help support them and their family (41.7% strongly agreed [n=63] and 54.3% agreed [n=82]). Four percent (n=6) neither agreed nor disagreed (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Percentage of feedback from parent carers in the Transitions programme who said they had a better understanding of the ideas and resources that would help support them and their family



As one parent carer of an autistic teenager said:

“It was lovely listening to how to support the child – very positive. Often all you hear about problems, this was all about figuring out what support you need and how to get it. It was very interesting, very interactive.”

One parent carer said it would have been great if this type of support had been available when her child was younger as some of the areas felt more relevant to those with younger children. Even so, they felt it was worthwhile:

“I’m not a big fan of group meetings. But I absolutely learnt a lot out of it. There was a lot of information you mightn’t be able to use there and then, so that’s why it’s important for them to give you the resources and the handouts. You can walk away and keep them, so you know where to get the support later when you actually need it. That’s invaluable.”

They said they had kept the Contact NI leaflet and felt they would give them a call in the future if they needed any other support or advice. This was very important and reassuring to them.

Increasing parent carers’ confidence and emotional wellbeing

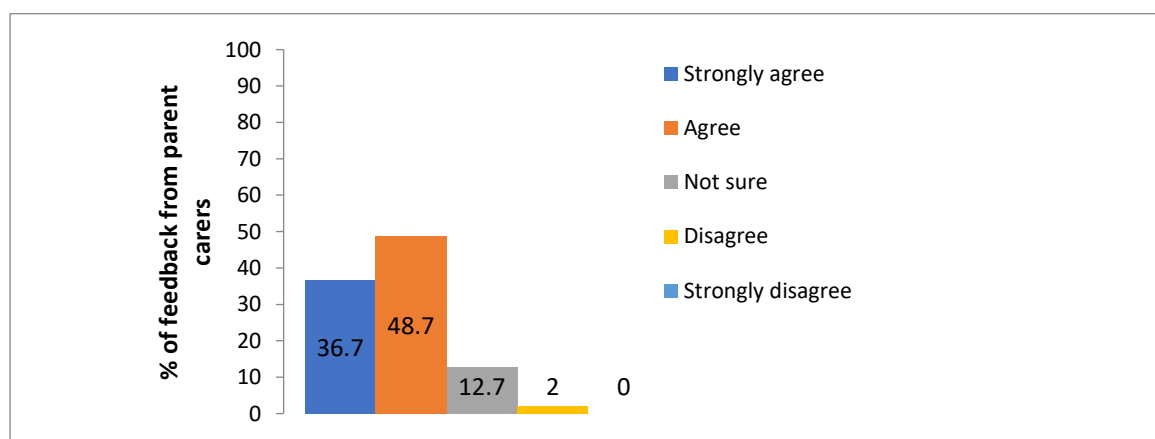
A core piece which runs through all the sessions, as well as being addressed directly in the advocacy session, is the importance of helping parent carers develop their confidence and skills in being able to navigate the system and be assertive in accessing what they and their young person are entitled to.

The programme provides a powerful combination of giving parent carers the facts and useful explanations about various parts of the transition process and the types of support available, as well as giving them an opportunity to talk in ‘safe surroundings’, and a space to plan out what they need to do or find out in a supported way.

Hearing what other parent carers have done, how they have faced challenges and how they are dealing with them is also useful in terms of showing them what might be possible, and helping them to feel empowered in their role as parent carer of a disabled young person.

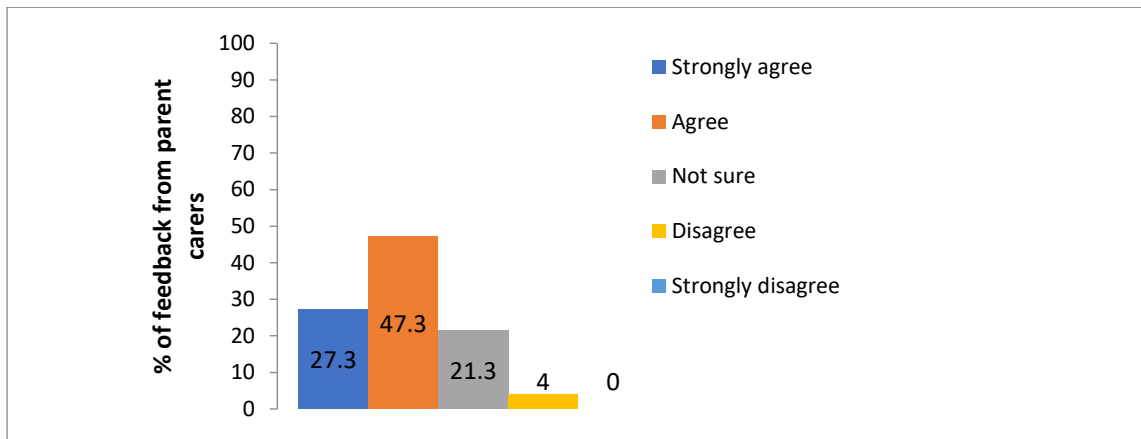
Most respondents (85.3%, n=128 out of 150) said they felt more confident after attending the workshops (36.7% strongly agreed [n=55], 48.7% agreed [n=73]). Nearly 13% said they neither agreed, nor disagreed (12.7%, n=19) and 2% (n=3) disagreed (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Percentage of feedback from parent carers in the Transitions programme who said they felt more confident



Four-fifths (74.7%, n=112) said they felt better able to deal with stress (just over a quarter strongly agreed [27.3%, n=41] and just under half agreed [47.3%, n=71]). Just over a fifth neither agreed nor disagreed (21.3%, n=32) and 4% disagreed (n=6) (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Percentage of feedback from parent carers in the Transitions programme who said they felt better able to deal with stress



As one parent carer said:

“Transition should not be stressful and it will be managed well. [I now know] that help is available.”

Some of the school staff also commented that they had seen parent carers become more confident in their discussions with them. One described it in the following way:

“Parents seem to know more, or at least they know better now what questions to ask. We get a lot of new questions now, specifically about Further Education groups. They don’t know the answers themselves, but they know what to ask about.”

Building parent carers’ social networks

An important strategy in the way the sessions were designed was to encourage interaction between parent carers. Many parent carers of disabled children can be socially isolated. They often have fewer opportunities to meet other parent carers in similar situations to themselves.

The workshop sessions were all structured in ways to encourage people to feel at ease, ask questions and share their experiences. Tea and coffee were provided, the mix of formal presentation helped to settle people into the group, questions and chat were encouraged throughout the session and there was time for discussion at the end of the session.

Having two Transition Outreach workers also helped with this in terms of managing group dynamics and supporting people. Several interviewees said that the discussions could get emotional, particularly in the first session when they were sharing their experiences. There was a theme running through the interviews that these parent carers have not had many chances to have their stories heard in a safe space. Often, they are so busy focusing on meeting their child’s needs, their own feelings and needs are not given attention.

As one of the Transition Outreach Workers described:

“In those sessions they get that they’re not the only one, other people are the same. There’s a penny drop moment in that first meeting – it cracks the glass, shatters the barrier. It’s often emotional - people feel vulnerable then they get hopeful. It helps them find out things and gives them the strength to carry on.”

The drop-in nature of the sessions helped with engagement in that if parent carers were not able to attend a session they were not penalised. They could attend the next available session and get any resources that they wanted from previous sessions at that stage.

A WhatsApp group for parent carers was set up for some of the groups. Parent carers were also given vouchers for a local coffee shop so they could meet up as a group outside of the sessions to socialise. These strategies have been beneficial in terms of reducing parent carers’ isolation and increasing their social networks with other parent carers of disabled children.

As the parent of an autistic teenager put it:

“What changed for me is that I realised in many ways even though my child has autism, they’re not that different from my other children. They still need to learn how to do things, and I need to help them do that. So, I worried about putting them on the bus – how would they cope? But we talked about it in group, and I decided well, let’s try it. Let’s do something short and see how they got on. I would let them go to the shop by themselves for 15 minutes – start off with something small and build it up from there depending on how they get on. They need to learn how to do that. And to be honest that was important learning for me as a parent as well, I need to learn how to let them do that too.”

The dynamic within the group of the facilitators presenting information and also encouraging the group to share their experiences worked very well. As one parent carer said:

“Everyone was very relatable, even if their kids were a different age, they just got where you were coming from, and hearing other people’s experiences gave you ideas.”

Another parent carer said:

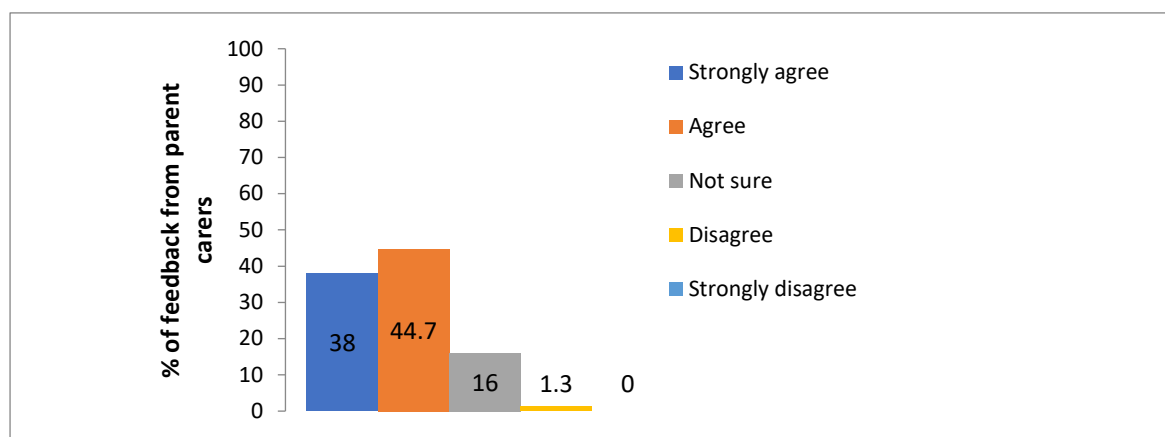
“I like the idea of a group all interested in gaining information and support and helping each other.”

Parent carers also liked that the sessions were interactive and not just information-focused. As one parent carer put it:

“The craic in the group was good.”

Most feedback from parent carers (82.7%, n=124) said they felt less isolated (38% strongly agreed [n=57] and 44.7% agreed [n=67]). Sixteen percent neither agreed nor disagreed (n=24) and 1.3% disagreed (n=2) (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Percentage of feedback from parent carers in the Transitions programme who said they felt less isolated



Feedback from each session

The sessions all showed similar feedback from the parents and carers about the impact. The feedback from each session is briefly outlined below:

Session 1 - Planning for transition

As noted above, the first session aims to address hopes, fears and aspirations for the young people, provide an overview of the transition process, and give parent carers tools to help them lead the way. This session covers:

- The transition process detailing the roles of the young person, the parent carer and other professionals, as well as what and when it should happen;
- Changes to finances, social and health care, and education;
- Parent carers are given a template to help them start to plan for transition.

Thirty-eight participants provided questionnaire feedback about the difference that the ‘planning for transition’ session had made to various outcomes. Overall, the findings were positive (Table 2). People found the session particularly useful in terms of them feeling better informed about to get the support they need (94.7%), feeling less isolated (84.2%) and having a better understanding of ideas and resources that would support them and their family (84.2%). The session was also effective in terms of helping around two-thirds of the participants feel more confident (65.8%), and better able to deal with stress (68.6%).

Table 2: Participant feedback about the difference they felt the ‘Planning for transition’ session made

Participant feedback about outcomes	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Grand Total
I feel better informed about how to get the support I need	54.6% (n=21)	40.2% (n=15)	5.2% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=38)
I feel more confident	31.6% (n=12)	34.2% (n=13)	31.6% (n=12)	2.6% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=38)
I feel better able to deal with stress	21.2% (n=8)	47.4% (n=18)	26.3% (n=10)	5.3% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=38)

I feel less isolated	34.2% (n=13)	50 % (n=19)	13.2% (n=5)	2.6% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=38)
I have a better understanding of the ideas and resources that can help support me and my family	34.2% (n=13)	50% (n=19)	15.8% (n=6)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=38)

Many parent carers highlighted that during this session they realised how many things they did not know. Comments included:

"I know nothing that I'm supposed to know about."

"Issues medically moving to adult services. I have a lot to learn and prepare for."

"How uninformed parents are about the provision available post 16, how difficult it is for them."

Hearing that other parents were in similar situations to themselves brought a sense of comfort and solidarity:

"Am not on my own everyone has same concerns."

"That most parents in Transition feel the same way."

"Liked knowing I am not alone, I can share my experience."

They felt reassured that there was support out there and they would be able to access it. This included legal support, resources, better understanding about what support was available and key responsibilities of different people like the Transition Officers.

"I need to start asking more questions. There is a lot more on offer than I thought."

"Legal information. New contacts."

"Legal rights, the transition process."

"Us parents aren't alone. There is information there if we know who to contact."

"We do not have to do this on our own."

They also highlighted practical steps that they would be able to take after the session:

"Call the school about school's support for exams "

"Check school existing transition plan."

"Check the senac.co.uk website."

"Get in contact with Transition Team to enquire re. a social worker."

“Inform partner. Talk to my son, start that conversation with him. Reach out to SEN independent service. Reach out to Transition officer in EA.”

“Look up the websites and info I have been given.”

“Research some of the links provided in the handouts.”

Session 2 - Person-centred planning for your young person

As noted above, person centred planning aims to put children and young people at the centre of planning and decisions that affect them. When children are meaningfully involved, this can change their attitude, behaviour and learning and make them active partners who work with adults to bring about change. This second session covers:

- What person-centred planning is and how it can help meet the young person’s needs;
- Tools to help with person-centred planning;
- Identifying what options might be available.

Twenty-eight participants provided questionnaire feedback about the difference that the ‘Person-centered planning for your young person’ session had made to various outcomes. Overall, the findings were positive (Table 3). People found the session particularly useful in terms of them feeling better informed about to get the support they need (100%), having a better understanding of ideas and resources that would support them and their family (100%), feeling more confident (100%) and feeling less isolated (75%). The session was also effective in terms of helping around three-quarters of the participants feel better able to deal with stress (71.5%).

Table 3: Participant feedback about the difference they felt the ‘Person centered planning for your young person’ session made

Participant feedback about outcomes	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Grand Total
I feel better informed about how to get the support I need	42.9% (n=12)	57.1% (n=16)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=28)
I feel more confident	25% (n=7)	75% (n=21)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=28)
I feel better able to deal with stress	17.9% (n=5)	53.6% (n=15)	25% (n=7)	3.6% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=28)
I feel less isolated	35.7% (n=10)	39.3% (n=11)	25% (n=7)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=28)
I have a better understanding of the ideas and resources that can help support me and my family	32.1% (n=9)	67.9% (n=19)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=28)

In the space for open-ended feedback, parent carers highlighted their key learning from the session as including what the transition planning process involves, support organisations, and the importance of planning in advance and speaking with their young person:

“EMA for pupils after 5th Year.”

“I have learnt that I need to promote more independence for my child.”

“Need to have more help from school for going forward to Uni.”

“That a transition plan is a living document.”

“The importance of early stage planning.”

“Names of a range of support organisations.”

They greatly valued the opportunity to talk with other parent carers and exchange experiences, as well as reflect on what they could do differently or who they could ask for support:

“I'm not the only one that does too much for their child.”

“Enjoyed speaking to other parents.”

Parent carers also described what they felt they would be able to do as a result of attending. These included feeling less stressed, as well as practical steps around contacting other professionals such as the school, solicitors, social workers and other statutory and non-statutory organisations, finding out more information, and speaking to other family members such as their partner and child:

“Be less anxious.”

“Check what [my] daughter feels.”

“Find out what my son's likes are.”

Talk to open up to my son about what he wants in case I'm missing something.”

“Contact school to check/ find out more about transition meeting with school.”

“Look up opportunities for all in Southern Trust link that was shared.”

“Try to get my young person to do more for themselves.”

“Phone solicitor to arrange becoming power of attorney.”

Session 3 - Your carers' rights and entitlements

As noted earlier, the carers' rights session supports parent carers to understand their rights as carers, explore the different types of financial support that are available, learn about workplace rights and discover other support available to them. Information includes:

- Legal rights to carers assessments and direct payments;
- Understanding carers' rights at work and how to be assertive in negotiating them;
- Health and Social care Trust support such as local Care Coordinators and other social services support for carers;
- Carers Assessment, Direct payments, Allowance and Carers Credit;
- Other forms of support.

Twenty-seven participants provided questionnaire feedback about the difference that the 'Carers rights and entitlements' session had made to various outcomes. Overall, the findings were positive (Table 4). People found the session particularly useful in terms of them feeling better informed about to get the support they need (100%), having a better understanding of ideas and resources that would support them and their family (100%), feeling more confident (85.2%) and less isolated (74%). The session was also effective in terms of helping around three-quarters of the participants feel better able to deal with stress (70.3%).

Table 4: Participant feedback about the difference they felt the 'Your carers' rights and entitlement' session made

Participant feedback about outcomes	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Blank	Grand Total
I feel better informed about how to get the support I need	44.4% (n=12)	55.6% (n=15)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=27)
I feel more confident	25.9% (n=7)	59.3% (n=16)	11.1% (n=3)	3.7% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=27)
I feel better able to deal with stress	25.9% (n=7)	44.4% (n=12)	22.2% (n=6)	7.4% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=27)
I feel less isolated	25.9% (n=7)	48.1% (n=13)	25.9% (n=7)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=27)
I have a better understanding of the ideas and resources that can help support me and my family	40.7% (n=11)	59.3% (n=16)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=27)

Parent carers again highlighted that they had gained a lot of useful knowledge from this session including benefits, rights and entitlements, controllership, carers assessment and other types of information. Comments about what they had learned included:

"A lot of useful tips."

"Excellent session lots of really good info."

“My local Trust has a Carer's co-ordinator to register with. direct payments can be available to me/my child.”

“To apply for a lot of things we should be doing to help our child.”

“How much support is lacking for my family and what I'm actually entitled to.”

“More advice controllership, advice on carers assessments.”

Parents valued the open discussions and getting more information so they felt better informed. They said there was a lot of information provided and that it was useful to meet others in the same situation and to have the phone number for questions. Similar to the other sessions, parent carers were able to describe a range of practical steps they would take as a result of attending the session. These included looking at websites, arranging carers’ assessments, contact solicitors, GPs and other resources of support.

Session 4 - What is advocacy/self-advocacy?

As noted earlier, the Advocacy/ self-advocacy session covers advocacy, looks at the roles of carers within the system, what rights they have and helps parent carers to develop skills for negotiating these. It also helps parent carers to have realistic expectations through recognising that self-advocacy is about getting their voices heard and upholding their rights, and not necessarily getting everything they want. Information includes:

- Learn the tools and skills for self-advocacy;
- Assertiveness, good communication practice and negotiation skills;
- Understanding body language and tone of voice.

Fifteen participants provided questionnaire feedback about the difference that the ‘What is advocacy/ self-advocacy’ session had made to various outcomes. Overall, the findings were positive (Table 5). People found the session particularly useful in terms of them feeling better informed about to get the support they need (100%), having a better understanding of ideas and resources that would support them and their family (100%), feeling more confident (86.6%) and feeling less isolated (93.3%). The session was also effective in terms of helping more than three-quarters of the participants feel better able to deal with stress (80%).

Table 5: Participant feedback about the difference they felt the ‘What is Advocacy/ self-advocacy’ session made

Participant feedback about outcomes	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Blank	Grand Total
I feel better informed about how to get the support I need	60% (n=9)	40% (n=6)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=15)
I feel more confident	33.3% (n=5)	53.3% (n=8)	6.7% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	6.7% (n=1)	100% (n=15)
I feel better able to deal with stress	26.7% (n=4)	53.3% (n=8)	13.3% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	6.7% (n=1)	100% (n=15)

I feel less isolated	33.3% (n=5)	60% (n=9)	6.7% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=15)
I have a better understanding of the ideas and resources that can help support me and my family	40% (n=6)	60% (n=9)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=15)

Parent carers' key learning from this session including finding out more about Carers NI, how to prepare for meetings, what their rights were and how to be more assertive:

"Communicate better, show more assertiveness."

"Refresh on behaviour types and how this can impact good resources for planning for meetings."

"To write meeting notes down and ask for meeting notes."

"Always plan ahead in advance of meetings."

"Rights and what is available and what can be accessed."

"Employment rights - need to give you a business reason why your request to worked round has been rejected."

"Entitled to extra parental leave (perhaps for Summer months)."

They appreciated hearing that other carers were experiencing similar problems and felt validated in their roles and supported:

"[I] felt that self-advocacy is encouraged."

"Liked advice given and will take on board."

"I have a right to be heard."

Practical steps they said they would take as a result of attending including following up with social workers, getting more information, registering as a carer and consider power of attorney.

Session 5 - Planning for the future

The aim of the 5th session is for parent carers to develop their transition planning further. They learn more about opportunities for their young person. They are also asked to identify other topics and areas of support that they would like to know more about. This involves facilitated exploration about different areas relevant to transition such as:

- Leaving school;
- Getting a job/ training;
- Moving out;

- Going out/ leisure activities;
- Having a relationship;
- Money Matters;
- Health Matters.

The parent carer is asked to consider a range of questions for each area with their young person including:

- Where would I like to be?
- What support/ information do I need?
- Where can I source this information/ support?
- How do I know I'm there?

Twenty-four participants provided questionnaire feedback about the difference that the 'Planning for the future' session had made to various outcomes. Overall, the findings were positive (Table 6). People found the session particularly useful in terms of them feeling better informed about to get the support they need (100%), having a better understanding of ideas and resources that would support them and their family (100%), feeling more confident (95.8%) and feeling less isolated (87.5%). The session was also effective in terms of helping more than three-quarters of the participants feel better able to deal with stress (79.2%).

Table 6: Participant feedback about the difference they felt the 'Planning for the Future' session made

Participant feedback about outcomes	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Grand Total
I feel better informed about how to get the support I need	58.3% (n=14)	41.7% (n=10)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=24)
I feel more confident	50% (n=12)	45.8% (n=11)	4.2% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=24)
I feel better able to deal with stress	33.3% (n=8)	45.8% (n=11)	20.8% (n=5)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=24)
I feel less isolated	37.5% (n=9)	50% (n=12)	8.3% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	4.2% (n=1)	100% (n=24)
I have a better understanding of the ideas and resources that can help support me and my family	54.2% (n=13)	45.8% (n=11)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=24)

Key learning from this session included finding out more about various supports around education, dietary needs, Family Fund Trusts, legal support and other organisations. Parent carers highlighted that they had felt listened to and enjoyed the people helping each other.

"Hearing other stories, feel others are going through the same."

“I liked the idea of a group all interested in gaining information and support and helping each other.”

“Facilitators were very interested in what parents require/need.”

Once again parent carers highlighted specific, practical steps they would be able to take as a result of attending the session:

“Check out some of websites listed in today's information booklet.”

“Read all literature received and make the necessary phone calls.”

“Contact Armagh College and find out details on transport to College.”

“Contact Family Fund, collate a file with all the information I am receiving.”

“Check out Turn2us and EA for summer scheme provision.”

Summary

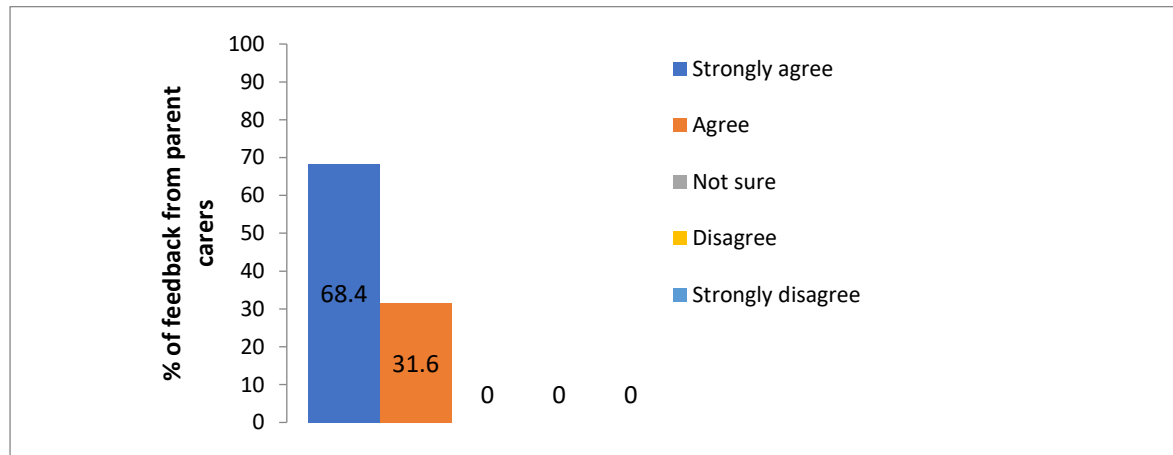
Feedback from participants shows that each of the sessions had had a positive effect on their levels of confidence, how well informed they about how to get support, understanding better ideas and resources that could help support them and their family. They also reported feeling less isolated and better able to deal with stress.

Impact on parent carers in the additional schools who received condensed sessions

Increasing parent carers' knowledge about what support is available

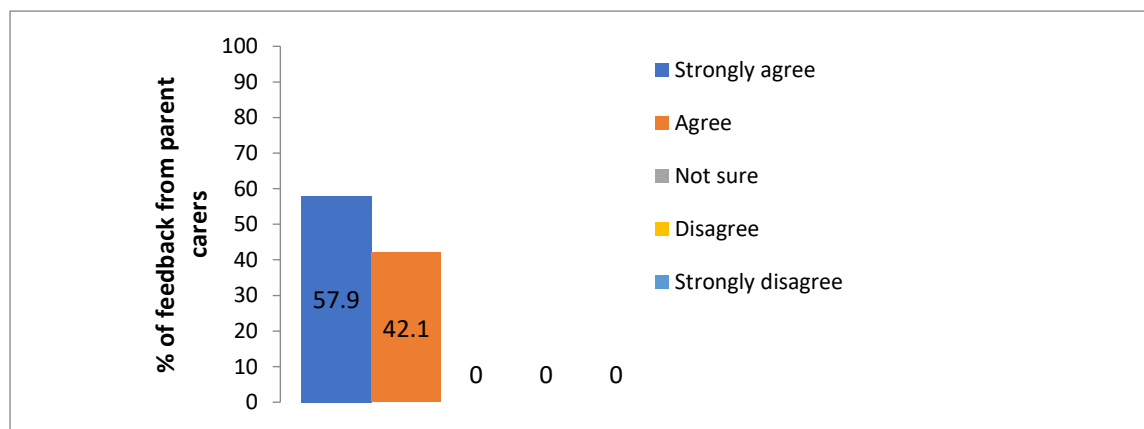
All the feedback from parent carers who received condensed sessions (100%, n=19) reported feeling better informed about how to get the support they needed (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Percentage of feedback from parent carers in the Condensed programme who said they felt better informed about how to get the support they needed



All the feedback from parent carers (100%, n=19) reported having a greater understanding of the ideas and resources that can help support them and their family (57.9% strongly agreed [n=11] and 42.1% agreed [n=8]) (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Percentage of feedback from parent carers in the Condensed programme who said they felt had a better understanding of the ideas and resources that could help support them and their family

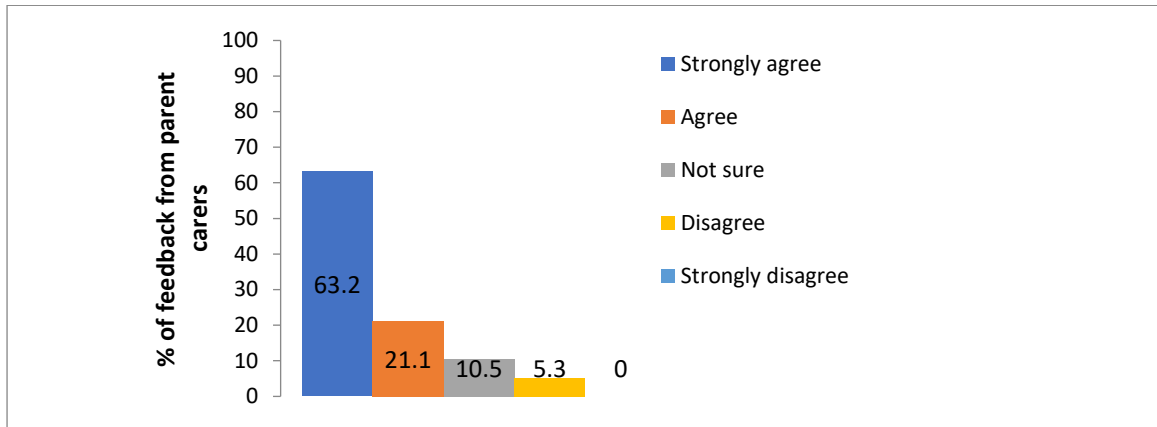


Increasing parent carer confidence and emotional wellbeing

Nearly 85% of the feedback from parent carers who attended the condensed sessions (84.2%, n=16) said they felt more confident after attending the workshops (63.2% strongly agreed [n=12], 21.1% agreed [n=4]). 10.5% [n=2] said they neither agreed nor disagreed, and 1 disagreed (5.3%, n=1) (Figure 11).

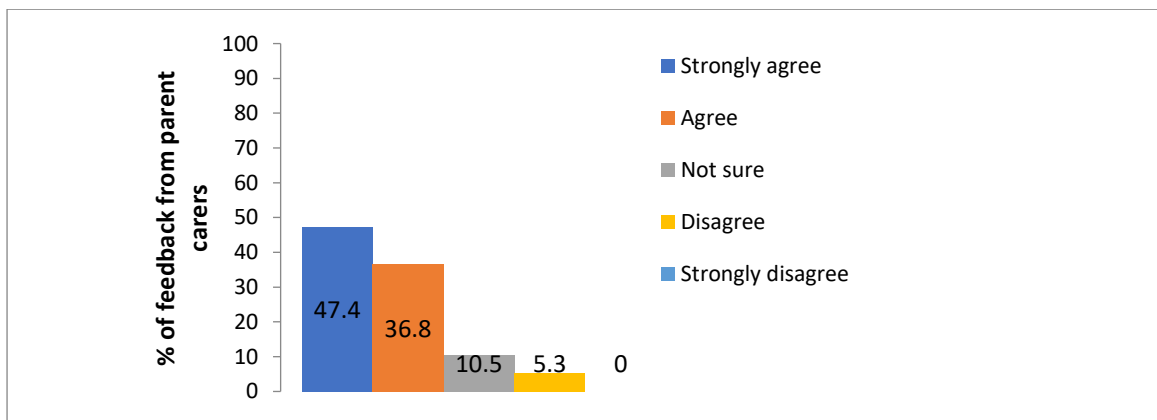
Although there were fewer people who attended the condensed sessions than the 4 school sessions, this is a lower proportion who said they felt more confident. This may reflect the shortened nature of the sessions and them having less time to explore their needs and develop as a group.

Figure 11: Percentage of feedback from parent carers in the Condensed programme who said they felt more confident after attending the workshops



Most of the feedback from parent carers who attended the condensed sessions (84.2%, n=16) said they felt better able to deal with stress (strongly agreed [47.4%, n=9] and 36.8% agreed (n=7). 10.5% neither agreed nor disagreed (n=2) and 5.3% disagreed (n=1) (Figure 12). Similarly, this is a lower proportion than said they were better able to deal with stress in the longer Transition programme that was delivered in the four original schools.

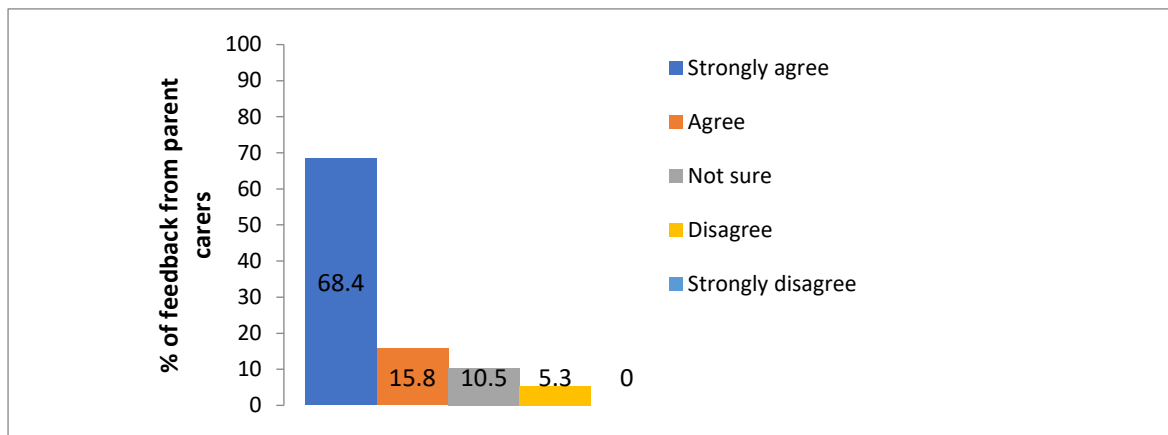
Figure 12: Percentage of feedback from parent carers in the Condensed programme who said they felt better able to deal with stress



Building parent carers' social networks

Most of the responses from parent carers who attended the condensed sessions (84.2%, n=16) said they felt less isolated (68.4% strongly agreed [n=13] and 15.8% agreed [n=3]). 10.5% neither agreed nor disagreed (n=2) and 5.3% disagreed (n=1).

Figure 13: Percentage of feedback from parent carers in the Condensed programme who said they felt less isolated



Impact of the Careers fairs

Forty-nine of the attendees at the Careers fairs provided feedback and they all said that the fair had helped them or their young person identify opportunities. Comments included:

"Great info."

"Did not realise there were so many opportunities."

"I am feeling a little more positive."

"Great to see so many organisations in the one place."

"Didn't realise there were so many opportunities in our area."

"Fabulous advertising of what's available post-school."

"More opportunities than I was aware of."

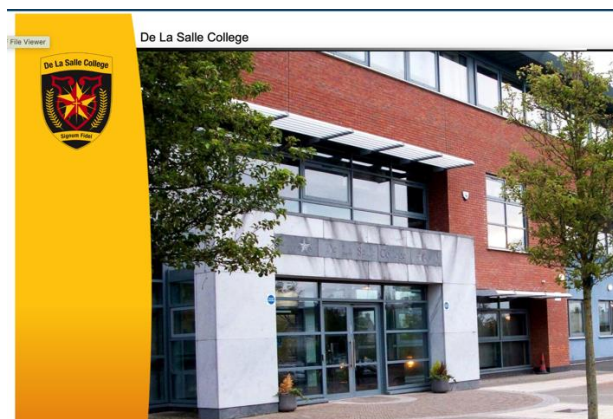
Summary

The data from parent carer feedback shows that the programme has been successful in improving its intended short-term outcomes.

8. School spotlight

In this section, a short overview is provided of the programme in each site, its delivery and impact.

De la Salle Belfast mainstream secondary



Source: <https://www.delasallecollege.org.uk>

De La Salle College is an urban secondary school that has provided education to the students of West Belfast for almost 50 years.³ It is a Catholic maintained all ability, 11-18 school for boys. The school has a specialist provision class with options for learning and social communication/ autism. The Learning support department comprises of the SENCO, Deputy SENCO, specialist teachers and a team of classroom assistant staff. It maintains links with partner primary schools and schools within the Area Learning Community, operating a Sixth form partnership with St Genevieve's High School (De La Salle College, 2024).

In 2022-23, there were 753 pupils enrolled at the school and just over half (56.6%) of the pupils are eligible for free school meals. Thirteen percent have a statement of special educational needs (n=98), and 30.4% were SEN non-statemented (n=229) (Department of Education, 2023).

The SENCO and team do a lot of work with the young people themselves around transitions. They saw the Contact NI Transitions programme as a good opportunity to complement this. The school used an active outreach and multi-strand approach to encourage parent carers to attend – writing letters and texting all parent carers of eligible children, and also actively encouraging parent carers they thought would benefit (particularly from Years 12 and 14) by phoning them and following up on an individual basis.

Thirteen survey responses were received and feedback was very positive. All the feedback showed that parent carers gained a better understanding of the ideas and resources that could help support them and their family (100%; n=13). Most responses (84.6%; n=11) said they felt better informed about how to get the support they needed. They valued learning about what support, rights and resources were available, better understanding what type of support they might need, learning how to identify who was a carer and better understanding the transition process.

³ <https://www.delasallecollege.org.uk>

Parent carers highlighted the increases in their knowledge and understanding about the transition process and support that was available:

*“There was just lots of information I didn’t know was available.”
“[I learnt] that there is help for me.”*

“I thought help ended at school, but I learnt that will be able to get help if my son goes to University. If I hadn’t gone to these sessions, I wouldn’t have known that.”

They were motivated to take action after attending the sessions. This included looking at various websites and benefits, following up with suggested contacts. Several parent carers said they would encourage their child to do more things for themselves and become a little more independent.

Most feedback said that parent carers felt more confident (92.3%; n=12) and better able to deal with stress (61.5%; n=8):

“I feel more positive about transition.”

Most felt less isolated after attending the sessions (84.6%; n=11). They enjoyed spending time with other parent carers and hearing about each other’s experiences and ideas:

“[It was good to] meet other people in the same situations.”

“Peer support was great.”

“I enjoyed all the conversation.”

Several said they now felt ready to encourage their child to become more independent:

“I’m not the only one that does too much for their child ... [As a result of these sessions] I will try to help my son with his independence.”

All those providing feedback said they would recommend Contact services to others (100%, n=13).

St Paul's High school, Bessbrook, Co. Armagh



Source: <https://stpaulsbessbrook.org>

St Paul's High School is a Catholic school of almost 1500 students of all abilities, from children with learning difficulties in the Learning Support centre to young people taking part in AS, A2 and Applied Post-16 courses. It is a rural secondary, Catholic maintained (non-grammar) school.⁴

The Learning Support centre supports students with moderate learning difficulties and who hold a statement of Special Educational needs. Students share the resources that the school has to offer and are integrated with their peers in mainstream, both socially and academically. There is a comprehensive Leavers' programme incorporating vocational skills sampling in collaboration with Southern Regional College and employment-based work experience. The school also has close links with prospective employers and 'Training for Employment' agencies (St Pauls High School, Bessbrook, 2024).

In 2022-23, there were 1729 pupils enrolled at the school. This included 156 children (9%) with a statement of special needs. A further 11% were SEN non-statemented (n=191). Just under a third of students (32.4%) were eligible for free meals.

The team in St Paul's provide a lot of support to young people around transitioning at 16+. They saw the Contact NI Transitions sessions as complementing the work the school was doing with the young people. It would help parent carers understand how to support their children as they navigate through transitions in education, employment/ supported employment, and other supports and entitlements.

The school used an active outreach and multi-strand approach to encourage parent carers to attend including sending information to all parents of young people with statements who were approaching transition. There was a pastoral team meeting with the SENCO, head of pastoral care, careers service and SEN who looked at who had signed up and refined the outreach strategy to encourage more people to participate. Staff helped some of the parent carers to complete the referral form and encouraged them on a one-to-one basis.

Thirteen survey responses were received and feedback was very positive. All (100%; n=13) responses from parent carers said they felt better informed about how to get the support

⁴ <https://stpaulsbessbrook.org>

they needed. They understood better what would be involved in the transition process and what help is available:

“Transition should not be stressful and will be managed well.”

“[I have learnt] where I can get help.”

All the respondents said they had a better understanding of the ideas and resources that would help support them and their family (100%, n=13). Parent carers highlighted that they had learnt about Family Fund, Trusts and legal support wills, rights for their children, what their child could do for themselves and how to support their independence, transition and sources of support.

People were motivated to take action as a result of attending the sessions. This included reading the resources, doing more research online, following up on contacts and finding out more about the Family Fund. Several said they would talk to their child more about what will happen when they leave school and what they wanted to do.

Most felt more confident (76.9%, n=10) and said they were now better able to deal with stress (84.6%; n=11):

“I feel more confident going forward in helping my child.”

Parent carers enjoyed getting to spend time and share their experiences with other parent carers. Most feedback said they felt less isolated (69.2%, n=9):

“[I liked] getting to know other parents.”

The sessions also encouraged parent carers to help their children become more independent:

“I have learnt that I need to promote more independence for my child.”

All would recommend Contact services to others (100%, n=13).

Sperrinview School, Dungannon



Source: <https://www.sperrinviewspecialschool.co.uk>

Sperrinview School is a controlled special school in an urban area catering for pupils with severe learning difficulties, from 3 to 19 years. The pupils are drawn from South and East Tyrone. Sperrinview is a co-educational, inter-denominational, day school, based on 2 sites, the main site in Dungannon and a Satellite site in Cookstown. It is a controlled, inclusive school serving the communities the pupils come from. Sperrinview special school also provides support to pupils with a diagnosis of severe learning difficulties, who have been unable to get placements in Sperrinview Special School. They are based in 4 local Primary Schools (PS), St Patrick's PS Annaghmore, Dungannon PS, St Patrick's PS Dungannon and St Patrick's PS Donaghmore. These classes are called SP EYFS (Special Provision in mainstream Early Years and Foundation Stage classes).⁵

In 2022-23 there were 132 pupils enrolled in the school with just under 40% of pupils eligible for free school meals (38.6%). All children attending the school have a statement of special educational needs (100%, n=132). There are no children with SEN who are non-statemented (Department of Education, 2023).

The SENCO and team have been running transitions sessions for the young people during school. They saw the Contact NI Transitions parent sessions as potentially complementing and filling a gap in support for families. The school used an active outreach and multi-strand approach to encourage parents to attend including personal conversations, writing to parents, and highlighting the sessions on the parent app and website.

Twenty-eight survey responses were received and feedback was very positive. Most (96%, n=27) respondents felt better informed about how to get the support they needed. They said the sessions helped them better understand ideas and resources that can help support them and their family (89%, n=25). Most felt better able to deal with stress (85%, n=23⁶) and more confident (82%, n=23).

"I've got all the answers to different questions I was wondering about."

"[I've learnt] that there are things out there to help my child."

⁵ <https://www.sperrinviewspecialschool.co.uk>

⁶ 27 responses were received for this question instead of 28 responses

“Us parents aren’t alone. There is information there if we know who to contact.”

Parent carers valued the information they had been given on the various topics, the opportunity to meet other parent carers and getting practical advice. Key areas they said they had learnt about included SEN classes and what support was available in South West College, rights in terms of what could be accessed for carers and for young people, what support organisations and other resources are available, and how to prepare for and approach situations differently.

Feedback from parent carers included:

“Before the course, I googled everything, I was always trying to find out, but you don’t know what you don’t know. The course was great with all the different topics. We’ve had our son’s diagnosis for years, but no one ever told us any of this. We have a social worker - now when they come out to the house, it’s me that’s giving them information.”

“[I’ve learnt] to apply for a lot of things we should be doing to help our child.”

“Delighted the school was open to facilitating this course. [It has been] invaluable for leavers’ parents /families.”

Parent carers felt energised and keen to take active steps after the sessions. These included reading through the information, registering as Carers, arranging power of attorney, following up about college courses, beginning the process of getting a social worker and checking out other support organisations.

The peer support element of the sessions was important. Feedback showed that parent carers felt less isolated (96%, n=27) and enjoyed meeting other parent carers. They liked getting to know each other:

“I am not the only one that feels like I do.”

A WhatsApp group for parent carers has helped them to keep in contact after the sessions, and some of the group continue to meet up for coffee and catchups.

Parent carers from Sperrinview were also invited to an Opportunities fair in Armagh in the middle of May 2023 to find out about opportunities and organisations who may be able to provide help as their child nears the age for leaving school. 97 people attended. The SENCO and staff from Sperrinview brought a bus load of their students to the fair. They benefitted from the use of the quiet area that was provided at the opportunity fair.

Some feedback from parent carers who attended the opportunities fair included:

“I did not realise there was so many opportunities in our area.”

“It has given me more information on options for my son.”

All would recommend Contact services to others (100%).



Source: <https://www.knockevinschool.co.uk>

Knockevin Senior School caters for pupils with severe learning difficulties from the ages of 3 to 19 within the County Down region. It is a controlled special school in an urban area. There are 3 sites, an Early Years centre in Dundrum, the Junior and Multi-disciplinary department in Downpatrick and the Senior school in Castlewellan which caters for children from 11+. During their Post-primary years, pupils work towards a variety of accreditations and have access to a wide range of opportunities to help prepare them for life as an adult. The Senior campus comprises 4 classrooms, a sensory zone and access to outdoor areas where activities are delivered using a 'Forest School' approach. Senior students have a range of job opportunities in an out of school that help them to develop work skills, gain confidence and experience working life.⁷

In 2022-23, there were 146 pupils enrolled at the school. Just under half of the pupils were eligible for free school meals (47.9%). 125 of the pupils have a statement of special educational needs (85.6%). The other 21 pupils are SEN non-statemented (14.4%) (Department of Education, 2023).

Seventeen survey responses were received and feedback was very positive. All the feedback from parent carers said they developed a better understanding of the ideas and resources that can help support them and their family (100%; n=17). They all felt better informed about how to get the support they needed (100%; n=17):

"[I now know] what to ask about school transition."

"Key points were explained in detail."

"[I've learnt that] my local Trust has a Carer's co-ordinator to register with. Direct payments can be available to me/my child."

⁷ <https://www.knockevinschool.co.uk>

Parent carers said they had learnt more about organisations available for advice, carers, transition planning process, the role of Transition officers, making a will, DSA helping with special dietary needs, employment rights, communicating better, benefits and direct payments. After the sessions they intended to take steps such as checking online resources, reading through the resources, getting a carer's assessment, setting up power of attorney and finding out more about summer scheme provision and tell others about the support.

Some parent carers also highlighted that they would now make a point of discussing the future with their children and finding out what their children wanted.

The parent carers felt more confident after attending the sessions (100%; n=16). They better understood what was involved in transition and what the various options were, as well as their rights:

"[Transition] is not a one size fits all – it will be tailored to different types of students."

"[I have gained a] full awareness of the transition planning process."

"[I can now] communicate better, show more assertiveness."

Parent carers said they felt more supported and less alone after attending the sessions. Most felt less isolated (88.2%; n=15) and better able to deal with stress (94.1%; n=16). They valued spending time with other people who were in similar situations to themselves:

"[I enjoyed] hearing other stories, feeling others are going through the same [as me]"

"We do not have to do this on our own."

"Hearing other parents' worries are like my own."

All the parent carers who provided feedback would recommend the Contact NI services to others (100%; n=16).

Magherafelt School partnership

The Magherafelt Rural Learning Partnership was established in 2007. The Magherafelt Learning Partnership (MLP) is a learning community of 6 schools: Kilronan Special School, Magherafelt High School, Rainey Endowed School, Sperrin Integrated College, St Mary's Grammar School and St Pius X College. Each school is co-educational, varying in size, type and history. It provides a full microcosm of the post-primary sector of Northern Ireland: it includes controlled, grant maintained, integrated, maintained and voluntary grammar, both denominational and non-denominational; only Irish Medium and single sex education are not represented.

A brief overview of each of the schools in the Magherafelt school partnership is provided below.

Kilronan school



Source:

https://www.kilronanschool.com/cmsfiles/items/slideshows/980_200_crop/o_1enbc8uum19d1nsl1ftq10tj1lf9j.jpg

Kilronan school in Magherafelt is a controlled Special school for children with severe learning difficulties from age 3 to 19 years.⁸ In 2022-23, there were 174 pupils enrolled at the school. All pupils have a statement of special educational needs (n=174) (Department of Education, 2023).

Kilronan School offers students opportunities and experiences to assist them in making the transition from school to adulthood. Giving pupils opportunities to complete work experience seeks to build upon what has been taught over earlier years through participation in a broad range of work experience activities from class based right through to community based placements. Work experience placements are decided upon by taking into account the students' needs, abilities, interests and aspirations as well as post-school opportunities available in the local area.

Class based work experience opportunities include washing and drying the dishes after break time, answering the class telephone, taking the class dinner order to the Kitchen Staff and making sure the dinner basket is brought up to the canteen each day. School based placements also offer the young people opportunities to assist the building supervisor, kitchen and office staff.

⁸ <https://www.kilronanschool.com>

Recent initiatives at the school include the young people opening their own Vinted shop called 'K-mark' and sorting through clothes to re-sell. School Leavers can also participate in community based work placements to further develop their employability skills and to give them the opportunity to apply skills developed through class and school based placements functionally, in a real life working environment. For example, Cafe Revive is a small coffee shop ran by the School Leavers every Thursday morning at First Magherafelt Presbyterian Church Hall. School Leavers also complete a work experience placement at Alternative Angles where they make a variety of products to sell within their local community. They have assembled parts together in order to make a variety of candles and reed diffusers. Other work experiences include attending the NRC in Magherafelt to experience the world of work in a salon environment.

Magherafelt High School



Source: <http://www.magherafelthigh.org/images/schoolLogo.jpg>

Magherafelt High School is a non-selective, co-educational 11-18 Post Primary school. In 2022-23, there were 623 pupils enrolled at the school. 8% of pupils have a statement of special educational needs (n=50), and 14.1% are SEN non-statemented (n=88). 28.1% (n=175) take free school meals. (Department of Education, 2023).⁹

Rainey Endowed School



Source: https://i2prod.belfastlive.co.uk/incoming/article19396699.ece/ALTERNATES/s810/0_the-raineyPNG.png

Rainey Endowed school is a Voluntary Grammar Post Primary school catering for young people aged 11-19. In 2022-23, there were 750 pupils enrolled at the school. 2.5% of pupils

⁹ <http://www.magherafelthigh.org/our-school/principal-s-welcome-message.html>

have a statement of special educational needs (n=19), and 3.7% are SEN non-statemented (n=28). 11.2% (n=84) take free school meals.(Department of Education, 2023).¹⁰

Sperrin Integrated College



Source: <https://x.com/IEFNI/status/1215226691800444929/photo/1>

Sperrin Integrated College is a secondary (non-grammar) school that is grant Maintained Integrated. It has a Grammar and All abilities Pathway entry.¹¹ In 2022/23, were 651 pupils enrolled at the school. 4.9% of pupils have a statement of special educational needs (n=32), and 10.1% are SEN non-statemented (n=66). 25.5% (n=166) take free school meals (Department of Education, 2023).

St Mary's Grammar School



Source: <https://magherafeltparish.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/sm2-web.jpg>

St. Mary's is a co-educational, Catholic Voluntary Grammar School located in the heart of Mid-Ulster, serving pupils from three counties-Derry, Tyrone and Antrim.¹² In 2022/23 there were 1108 pupils enrolled at the school. 1.2% of pupils have a statement of special educational needs (n=13), and 3.2% are SEN non-statemented (n=36). 7.5% (n=83) take free school meals (Department of Education, 2023).

¹⁰ <https://raineendowed.com>

¹¹ <http://www.sperrincollege.com>

¹² <http://www.stmarysmagherafelt.com/>



Source: <https://www.stpiusxcollege.org>

St Pius X College is a Roman Catholic Maintained co-educational secondary school (non-grammar) catering for young people from Year 8 to Year 15.¹³ In 2022/23 there were 1069 pupils enrolled at the school. 6.2% of pupils have a statement of special educational needs (n=66), and 13.9% are SEN non-statemented (n=149). 24.4% (n=261) take free school meals (Department of Education, 2023).

Feedback from parents whose children attended the Learning Partnership

Thirty-four survey responses were received, and feedback was very positive. Most feedback from parent carers said they developed a better understanding of the ideas and resources that can help support them and their family (94.1%; n=32). Most felt better informed about how to get the support they needed (97%; n=33):

"I learnt more about the mental capacity act."

Parent carers said they had learnt more about being assertive, their entitlements and rights:

"[I now know that] Carers assessment available to all."

Some parent carers highlighted that they had learnt practical strategies:

"[I learnt] to write meeting notes down and ask for meeting notes."

"[I have] a lot of sites to look up for more info."

"Start a plan for my meetings."

Most parent carers felt more confident after attending the sessions (76.5%; n=26):

"[I feel] stronger to plan a meeting for my needs."

"Supported that there is a phone number for questions."

"[I know] what I need to do to move forward."

Parent carers said they felt more supported and less alone after attending the sessions. Most felt less isolated (66.7%; n=22, 33 responses) and half felt better able to deal with stress (50%; n=17). They valued knowing that there was support available:

¹³ <https://www.stpiusxcollege.org>

“[I’m] more content with more knowledge.”

“That there are people to ask.”

“There is a listening ear that can advise.”

Nearly all of the parent carers who provided feedback (97%, n=33) would recommend the Contact NI services to others.

Arvalee School and Resource Centre, Omagh



Source: <https://strule.org/app/uploads/2019/02/Arvalee-School-Exterior-800x450.jpg>

Arvalee School and Resource Centre is a Controlled Special school. Opened in September 2016, Arvalee School is planned, built and developed around supporting children and young people aged 3 to 19 years who have Moderate and Severe Learning Difficulties.¹⁴

The building is designed into 4 learning hubs: Explore, Perform, Inspire and Create (EPIC). The hubs are designed to encourage pupils to work, learn and play together – extending learning throughout the building beyond the classrooms.

In 2022/23 there were 181 pupils enrolled at the school. 98.9% of pupils have a statement of special educational needs (n=179). Fewer than 4 were SEN non-statemented (Department of Education, 2023).

Twenty-seven survey responses were received and feedback was very positive. Most feedback from parent carers said they developed a better understanding of the ideas and resources that can help support them and their family (96.2%; n=26). All felt better informed about how to get the support they needed (100%; n=27).

Parent carers said they had learnt more about processes and entitlements such as DLA changing to PIP at age 16, entitlement to extra parental leave, legal rights and that transition is a process that takes time:

“That a transition plan is a living document.”

“The importance of early stage planning.”

“Who to ask for”.

Some parent carers also highlighted that they would speak with their children differently following the sessions:

“I will inform my partner, talk to my son, start that conversation with him. Reach out to SEN independent service. Reach out to Transition officer in EA.”

“Talk to [my daughter] about what she wants.”

¹⁴ <https://www.arvaleeschool.co.uk/home/>

Most parent carers felt more confident after attending the sessions (92.6%; n=25). They said they felt:

“Not alone. Proactive.”

“Supported.”

“[I learnt] how to be assertive.”

Parent carers said they felt more supported and less alone after attending the sessions. Most felt less isolated (88.9%; n=24) and better able to deal with stress (77.8%; n=21). They valued spending time with other parents:

“Meeting other parents. The space/freedom to talk openly and honestly.”

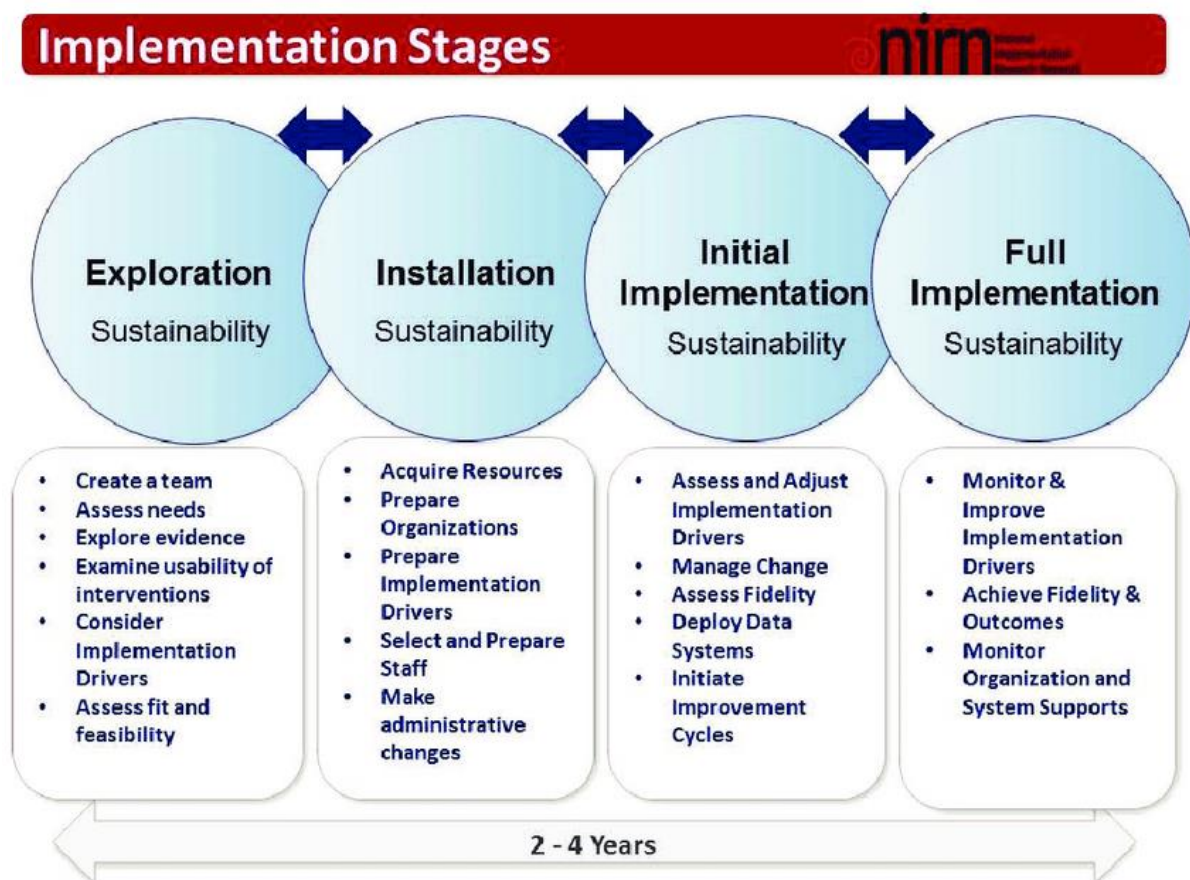
Most of the parent carers who provided feedback would recommend the Contact NI services to others (96.3%; n=26).

9. Conclusions and recommendations

The Preparing for Transition project aims to inform parent carers 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.

The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) describes key stages of implementation which projects progress through over time. These are shown in Figure 14 below. Key tasks must be accomplished at each stage, otherwise progress may be delayed or projects not reach their full potential.

Figure 14: Implementation stages



Source: Fixsen, D. and Blase, K. National Implementation Research Network and personal communication

In terms of implementation stages, the Transitions project has progressed through the Exploration, Installation and Initial implementation stages. The need for the parent carers was identified through earlier research and a programme developed to meet the identified gap in current support. An experienced team of trainers was installed and the needs of the schools and delivery context explored. Funding was secured for the first three years and access to delivery sites and participating parent carers established. Early piloting of the programme in the first delivery sites led to further refinements in programme content.

It should be noted that some important elements of installation still have to be completed. For example, programme delivery has not been manualised: no speaker notes or guidance manual exist for trainers to use. This constitutes a risk to future delivery if there is a change in existing staffing or new trainers need to be recruited. At the moment, the staff who are currently delivering the programme retain important information about what to say, how to organise sessions and the resources that exist locally, rather than having the organisation having it written down into a guidance document to support other people who may have to deliver the programme at some stage in the future.

One area which did not progress the way originally anticipated was the strand relating to future sustainability of the programme and upskilling parent carers to be able to take on a more formal future support role with their peers. The original proposal had outlined that sustainability would be promoted through training parent carers to deliver support to their peers, and through developing a single point of information resource for parent carers. It was anticipated that these support groups may become self-sustainable and continue once the project has ended. The aim was to do this by upskilling parent carers as trainers through train-the-trainer workshops, and encouraging parent carers who have gone through the process to support and mentor other parent carers. Whilst parent carers certainly provided each other with informal support during the sessions (and this was highly valued), it did not progress enough to be considered as self-sufficient – these parent carers would be unlikely to take on a more formal role in terms of delivering sessions or mentoring other parent carers in the way that, for example, the Transition Outreach Workers did. Future delivery of the programme should therefore retain the Transition Outreach Workers role in delivery in the same way, and continue to encourage parent carers to support each other in a less formal way.

This independent evaluation shows that the project successfully improves the intended outcomes by the end of delivery with the group of parent carers from each school. There are high levels of satisfaction with the programme content and delivery. The programme meets an important gap in support for parents of these young disabled people.

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, SENCOs and other school staff have confirmed that these are still key areas and are satisfied with the information presented, style of delivery and approach that has been developed. Parental feedback shows that every session leads to improvements in parent carer knowledge around the topic being covered as well as increased parental confidence, parent carers feeling better able to handle stress and feeling less socially isolated.

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 and other school staff 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.

The programme has the potential to proceed to full delivery and scale up to new locations if funding is secured. It should also be recognised that delivery in new sites will continue to require the same levels of planning and effort to engage as the early sites and short-cuts should not be taken with this. Schools should be approached several months before delivery is anticipated to start so that relationships can be built and engagement supported.

The following recommendations represent the key learning from the data:

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 (or other staff member) 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** – Parent carers 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 and staff members 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.

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, school staff 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 can 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 parent carers 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 parent carers 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 phase of delivery, plans should be further developed as to how to make this a sustainable approach for each area – this may involve training SENCOs, other school staff 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 parent carers to lead the groups, there would likely need to be more leadership capacity building support. Speakers notes and a guidance manual for trainers should be developed.
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.

Summary

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, school staff 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 certainly 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.

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